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Author
Fudeorca
Illustration
toi8

The
CONQUEROR
from a Dying Kingdom

The illustration depicts a young woman with long blonde hair and a crown-like headpiece, wearing a light-colored tunic, looking up at the night sky. Beside her, a young man with brown hair and pointed ears, wearing a light-colored shirt, looks towards the viewer. They are sitting in a dark forest at night, with a small fire burning between them. The sky is filled with stars and a bright meteor streaks across it. The title 'The CONQUEROR from a Dying Kingdom' is written in a stylized font at the bottom, with 'CONQUEROR' in large white letters and 'from a Dying Kingdom' in smaller red letters.



4

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The
CONQUEROR
from a Dying Kingdom

The illustration depicts a young man and woman sitting in a forest at night. The woman, on the left, has long blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored, patterned tunic. She is looking up at the starry night sky. The man, on the right, has short brown hair and is wearing a light-colored button-down shirt. He is looking towards the viewer. A small fire is visible in the background, casting a warm glow. The overall atmosphere is serene and contemplative.

Characters



YURI HO

Eldest son of the Ho family—one of the Shiyalta Kingdom's chieftain families. While studying at the Knight Academy, he founded Ho Company. Having foreseen the downfall of the kingdom, he's trying to locate a new continent. He has past-life memories of living in modern-day Japan.



CAROL FLUE SHALTL

A princess of the Shiyalta Kingdom raised to become the future queen. She attends both the Knight Academy and the Cultural Academy. She's prideful, but lacks worldly experience. Her beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes are evidence of her royal heritage.



MYALO GUDINVEIL

A girl who studies at the Knight Academy despite being the eldest daughter from a witch family. She is loyal to Yuri and serves him like a staff officer.



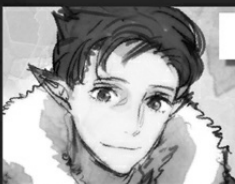
SHAM HO

Yuri's cousin and a student of the Cultural Academy. Despite her genius intellect, she struggles with social interaction.



LILLY AMIAN

A senior Cultural Academy student who shares a dorm room with Sham. She's a skilled engineer and often makes devices at Yuri's request.



ROOK HO

Yuri's father. He used to manage a ranch until he succeeded his brother to become ruler of Ho Province.



SUZUYA HO

Yuri's mother. She was born to a farming family and has a gentle manner that conceals her strong will.



ETHER WICHITA

A Kulati woman who fled her country after being branded a heretic. She teaches Kulatish language classes.



DOLLA GODWIN

A boy of Yuri's age who attends the Knight Academy. He's heavyset and proficient in martial arts. He's in love with Carol.



CAPH ORNETTE

The president of Ho Company. Yuri pulled him out of his former state of decline.



SHIMONÉ FLUE SHALTL

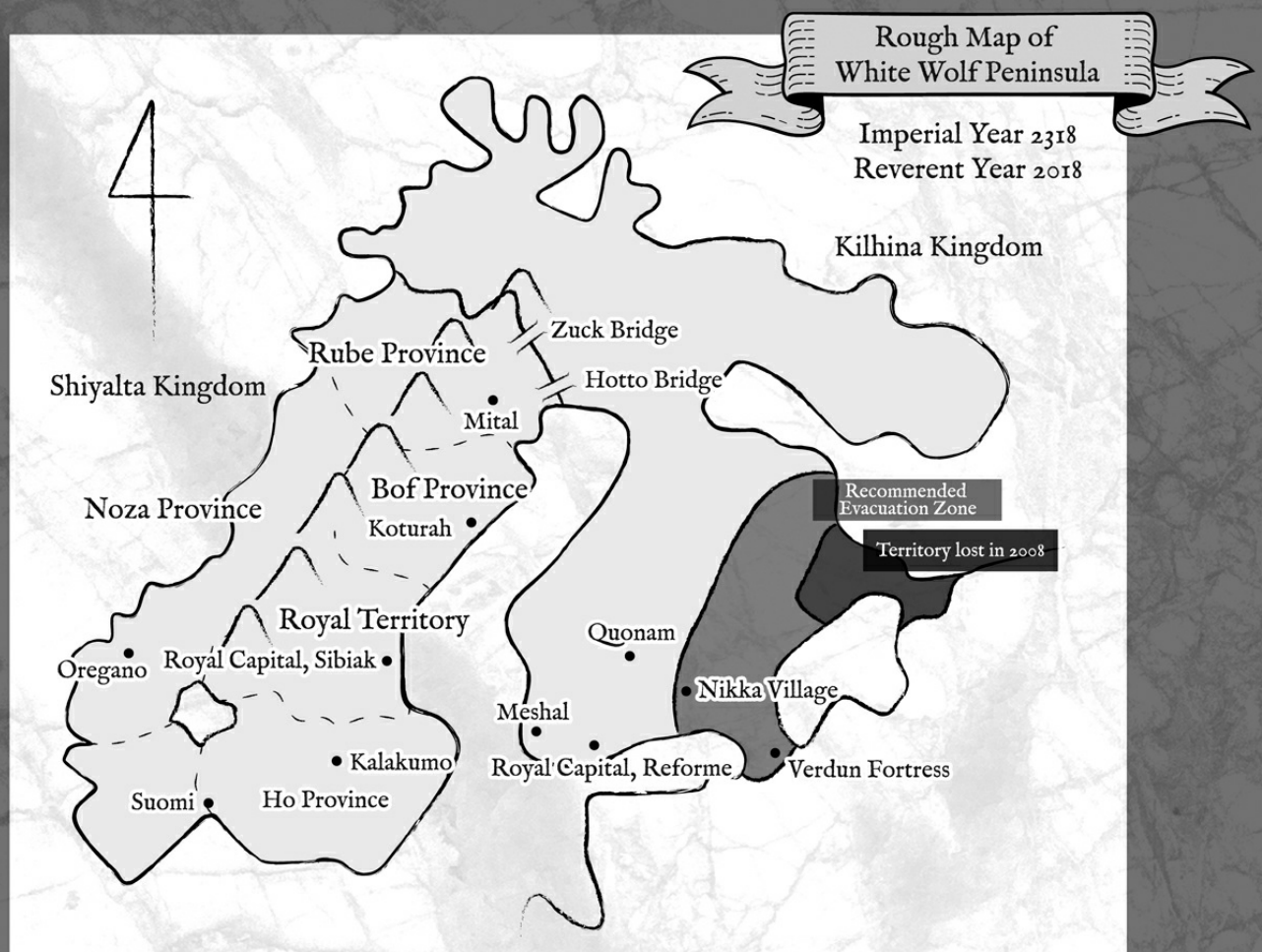
The queen of the Shiyalta Kingdom and mother to Carol and Carol's younger sister, Carla. Personality-wise, she's laid-back.

The Story So Far

The world is inhabited by two types of humans—the Shanti and the Kulati—that are locked in a battle for survival. Invaders from Kulati nations—who’ve branded the Shanti as demons—have left only two Shanti kingdoms standing, both of which are on White Wolf Peninsula.

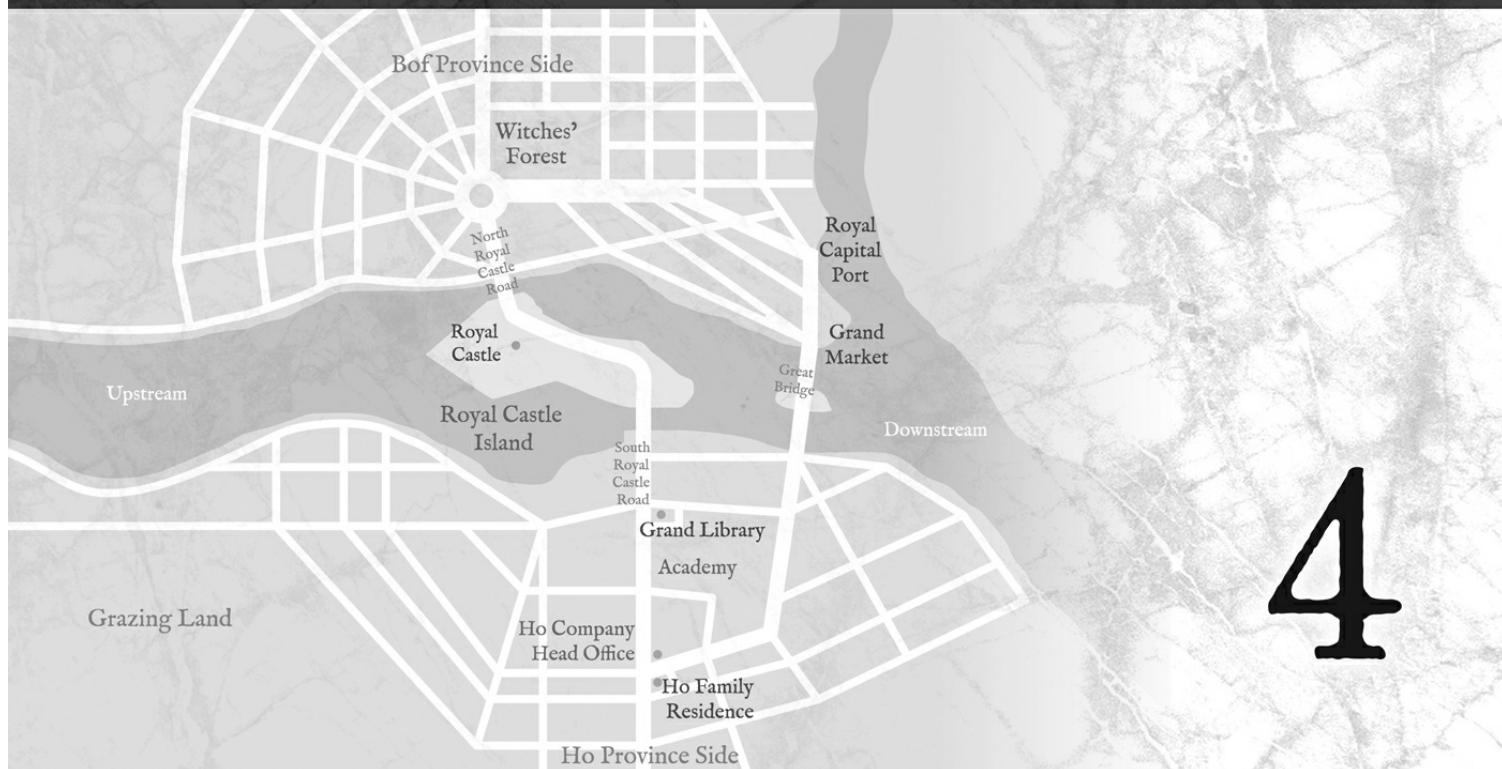
In one of those kingdoms, the Shiyalta Kingdom, a boy named Yuri was born to a chieftain family. Having realized that the place he calls home won’t persist for much longer, he started a business known as Ho Company while also studying at the Knight Academy to prepare him for his responsibilities as heir to the Ho family headship.

Using memories of his past-life spent in modern-day Japan, he developed a system for celestial navigation and is searching for a new continent while conducting trade with foreign nations.



C O N T E N T S

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Chapter 1 — Welcomed Back to Sibiak

I

I returned to Sibiak on April 4 as scheduled.

Once I'd found a suitable spot in the landing area, Stardust began to beat his wings and softly touched down. The moment we landed, he sat down on the ground, wings folded, understandably tired from the journey.

Unlike the journey out, we'd flown back in a straight line without making any stops. It meant we could cover a great distance in a single day, but for Stardust, it had been exhausting. He'd need a full week of rest to recover.

"Yuri!"

I heard a voice calling me and saw Sham running over. Suddenly, there was a loud thud and an impact against my chest. I felt myself being squeezed tight.

"Sham... You know, I haven't bathed in three days."

I wish she wouldn't press her nose against me.

"Mmgh mmgh," she mumbled, her face against me as she spoke. I couldn't understand a word.

"Forgive Sham. She reckoned you might die," a lazy-sounding voice called out. It was Lilly, wearing something like a woolen sweater over her uniform.

There's nothing quite like the sight of a big chest stretching out a sweater.

"It's been a while, Lilly." I bowed my head to her.

"Welcome home," Lilly said with a genuine smile.

Home?

"Nice to see you again," I replied.

I noticed a sheet on the ground a little farther away. It was shaded by a tree, and had what appeared to be several small lunch boxes on it. I'd let them know

when to expect my return, so they must've set up a picnic for me.

"What about me?" Sham asked while glaring up at me.

The only reason I responded to Lilly and not you was because she's the one who welcomed me back. Ah, wait—that's what those "mmgh mmgh" noises must've been.

"It's nice to see you again too, Sham," I said as I stroked her hair.

I told them a little about how my trip had gone as we walked to the eagle cages where I was going to drop off Stardust.

"Can I ask a favor, Lilly?" I asked before handing her a piece of paper that had gotten a little worn through repeated handling.

It was a list of ten observations recorded over the course of my ten-day trip. I'd been lucky. Even though some of the days had been cloudy, the sky had always been clear enough for me to pinpoint the sun's location.

"Okay. I think I can throw together a map from this," Lilly said as she took the piece of paper.

"Thank you. I'd help, but I'm a little too busy."

"Well, sure you are. You ain't got time to be troublin' over little chores like this."

Ugh... That's right. I'll barely have a moment to spare.

"I'm really sorry for dumping it on you."

I owe her big time.

"Oh, I wasn't complainin'," she replied. "Don't worry none."

"All right."

I hadn't taken it as a complaint in the first place.

"I know you've got a ton of things you oughta work on, so just leave this to me."

Now that's reassuring. Just hearing it makes me feel better.

“I’m glad you’re around to pamper me like this,” I said.

“I’d pamper you in a few other ways too, if you’d let me...”

Uh... Like how? “I love big sis Lilly so much! ♪” Is that the kind of pampering she’s talking about...? Uh... I’d better stop imagining that. Otherwise I’ll lose my mind.

“Okay, well, I’m counting on you,” I replied, pretending not to hear what she’d just said.

“Yeah... You can count on me.” Lilly looked a little downhearted as she nodded.

Sham stared at us both. “Um, you guys...?” she said in a childlike voice that she must’ve learned recently.

Uhhh...

“Ah, Sham, no, we ain’t...” Lilly sounded panicked for some reason.

“I’ll work hard on it too, you know!” Sham declared.

Well, she’s going to be doing all the math. She really will be working hard.

“Yeah, you’re a good girl, Sham. Good girl,” I replied.

“You’re counting on me too, right?”

Um...

“I’m really counting on you.”

“Really really?”

Really really...?

Ever since I’d gotten off of Stardust, I’d been thinking that Sham was in a strange mood today. Maybe it was because she hadn’t seen me in a while.



“I’ll be using the coordinates to fly to places, so I wouldn’t give the job to someone I couldn’t rely on. I’ll end up drowning somewhere in the sea if they’re not right.”

“Then tell me you’re counting on me.”

Didn’t I just say that?

“I’m counting on you,” I said as I crouched down and patted Sham’s head.

Pat pat. Pat pat.

“Eh heh heh. I’ll do my best.”

Good to know. She really is in a weird mood.

“Uh, umm... O-Oh, that’s right.” Lilly suddenly put her hand into her pocket and pulled out an item wrapped in cloth. “Here.”

I took it and unwrapped it to find a silver lighter inside.

“Oh, you finished it?”

“I knew I’d be busy after today. Figured I’d get it done beforehand.”

The lighter was still a little oversized, but at least it was more compact than the last one.

I opened it with a clink, then turned the wheel hard. I could feel it scraping against the flint through my finger. This one ignited much easier than the previous version.

“You’ve done a good job.”

“Glad you think so.”

It took some real intelligence to keep making improvements on a model like this.

“Thank you so much. This’ll make my next trip easier.”

“You’re easily pleased,” Lilly said with a bashful smile.



“Welcome back.”

Myalo was waiting for me in the dorm after I'd parted ways with Sham and Lilly.

"Sorry," Myalo said. "I meant to meet you when you landed."

"Don't worry about that."

There'd be something wrong if she had.

Unlike Sham and Lilly, Myalo should've been incredibly busy. She didn't have time for picnics.

"It's just that this morning was the deadline for applications," Myalo added.

"Ah, yeah, now that you mention it..."

It was 1 p.m. Given that this morning had been the deadline for applications to join the observation unit, Myalo should've been busy processing them all.

I looked out at the area in front of the dorm, and sure enough, the mailbox that had been there when I'd left was now gone. It must've been removed after the deadline.

"Did someone throw the mailbox away?" I asked.

"We gave up using it. Two days ago, there was an incident where someone tossed hot coals in there."

Ah... Who'd play a prank like that?

"Since then, people have been handing their applications directly to a few students in the dorm who aren't participating. We took down the notice that explained the application process this morning."

Okay. Sounds like all's well.

"Do you know who did it?"

"No. Should I have made an effort to catch them?" Myalo asked, as if making sure.

She might've searched for the perpetrator if there'd been time, but there was a mountain of more pressing tasks. Dropping hot coals into a mailbox in the dead of night with no one around to see was such a simple act of sabotage that it could've been anyone, including people from outside the academy. Although

outsiders weren't generally allowed on the academy grounds, anyone with a grappling hook and a little agility would have no trouble scaling the walls.

If that were the case, then the main suspect would be the Lacramanus family, given their hatred toward me. Since Carol was involved, however, it was also possible that a chieftain family was behind it.

I could rule out the Rube and Ho families since their eldest sons—Liao Rube and me—were participating, but the two other chieftain families might not have appreciated being left out.

We could probably sit around and speculate on potential culprits forever, but even if we *were* to identify who it was, we'd gain nothing from it. It would just be one less unsolved mystery and an opportunity to say, "Wow, I never thought they'd stoop so low."

Naturally, Myalo would've considered all this before deciding not to spend any time investigating.

"No, it doesn't matter," I replied. "It was dumb of us to use that mailbox."

We'd made ourselves vulnerable because we'd unconsciously decided that no one in a school for nobles would play a prank like that.

"I suppose so."

There was likely a bigger issue at hand, though.

"Were the letters inside burned up?" I asked.

The applications required a genuine signature from a parent, which meant substantial work was needed to prepare them. Unlike Cultural Academy students, the parents of most Knight Academy students lived in distant regions.

Although the queen had allowed people to send off letters via kingeagle along with government mail, only major cities could dispatch mail back to the capital. Anyone whose family lived way out beyond the mountains had barely had enough time to prepare their application as it was.

All things considered, it wouldn't be fair to demand that students reapply before we interviewed them, but I also wouldn't want to accept anyone without seeing a parent's signature first.

“I’d already emptied the mailbox that night, so only one application got burned. Thankfully, I was able to identify the applicant.”

Is that all? Sounds like we got lucky.

“Fortunately, they were from a region quite near the royal capital. They’ve already resubmitted their application.”

“No harm done then.”

It really was lucky. It had only cost us one mailbox and a little bit of extra work.

“I dread to think what would’ve happened if they’d struck early this morning,” Myalo said.

Today and the day before were probably the busiest days for submitting applications, which meant a good number of them would’ve been destroyed if someone had tried that prank today. It would’ve forced us to spend the day frantically identifying the affected students.

“Yeah...”

“We received applications from 179 students in total.”

“Uh... That’s a lot.”

“Yes. Considering there are only 258 students that meet the requirements, it’s a rather high application rate.”

She counted those too?

I’d guessed a credit limit like that would make only about twenty percent of students eligible. If it had come out as 258, then I’d gotten it just about right.

What I hadn’t predicted, however, was the level of interest. I’d thought less than half of the eligible students would be willing to risk their lives for the sake of a voluntary exercise, but the sign-up rate was about seventy percent. I didn’t know whether it was a measure of how serious Knight Academy students were about military service, or a measure of Carol and Liao’s popularity. In any case, it had exceeded my prediction.

“We actually had 201 applications, but twenty-two were from students who’d

falsified their grades, were too sick or injured to keep up, or—”

“That’s fine.” I cut Myalo off before she could continue. “We can save the in-depth reports for later.”

We were better off discussing this when we were sitting down somewhere.

“Oh, you’re right. I’ve had hot water prepared especially for you. The dormitory bath is ready to use.”

Wow. She really does have everything under control.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“It’s nothing. I’m just seeing to my basic responsibilities as your chief of staff.”

Myalo sounded just a little proud; it seemed she was pleased with her new job title.



After I’d left the bathroom, I put on my uniform for the first time in a while.

“All right, time for some food.”

I headed to the dining hall.

“A meal for one, please,” I said to the familiar woman serving the food.

“Coming right up. Haven’t seen you in a while. Did you go away somewhere?”

She mustn’t have had any idea what was going on. That wasn’t much of a surprise since commoners here couldn’t exactly watch the news; she was probably aware that a war was approaching, though.

“Uh, yeah, something like that,” I replied nervously as she gave me the tray that she’d loaded my food onto.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the tray and carrying it to an empty seat.

“Yuri. Here are the students we’re interviewing tomorrow,” Myalo greeted me as she sat in the seat across from me like it was her natural place. She placed a bundle of documents—made from Ho paper, a material I could hardly refuse to supply—down on the table. “I’ve sorted the forms with the most

promising students at the top, so you don't need to go through every last one."

"So you have. I'll go through what I can," I said while taking a bite of my bread.

It was a sad but unavoidable fact that we'd have to leave some students behind. Myalo was right that I wouldn't have to check through all of these documents—though it might've made some students mad to know I was cutting corners like this.

We'd probably take along a handful of the students from the bottom of the pile, but only if they made their worth clear in the interviews.

"Another issue is that we're not making good progress in preparing the necessary supplies."

Although we were hurrying to make arrangements, it wasn't possible to determine what supplies we'd need until we knew how many students we were taking. We couldn't make any progress until that was decided.

"Speaking of supplies," I said. "Before heading out, I summoned someone who handles logistics for the Ho family. He can't come with us because he's elderly, but he'll give us advice."

"Oh, really?"

Myalo suddenly looked a lot more relaxed, as if this issue had been weighing on her mind for some time.

I really should've mentioned that before I left.

"There's a lot you wouldn't think about unless you've got actual experience handling provisions," I explained. "There's a limit to how well you can plan it in your head."

Naturally, military provisions were something we studied here at the Knight Academy, but lectures were no substitute for experience. Anyone who attempted it without any prior experience would find themselves left with regrets, lamenting items that had been forgotten or solutions that hadn't been well thought-out.

"That's exactly what I was worrying over," Myalo said. "I should've known

you'd have the answer."

Her praise was unexpected.

"He should've arrived at my city residence by now. Let's go talk to him later."

"All right. First, I'd like to know how many students we're planning to limit our unit to."

"Hmm... A little over sixty students maybe."

"Sixty... Okay."

Carol and Liao would be able to look after thirty students each... Probably. Any more than that would be unmanageable.

"More people would mean we'd need to buy more provisions," I explained. "If we limit it to that size, we won't get in the way of the forces doing the fighting. Then again, even provisions for sixty people is going to be quite a lot."

I wasn't confident I could plan properly for a bigger expedition. I wanted everyone to get back safely—it would be stupid for anyone to die over a minor operation like this one. All things considered, a smaller unit was better.

"You're right," Myalo agreed.

"We also have to think about how many of those hundred-and-something students have a kingeagle that they can bring along."

Few parents were wealthy enough to hand out eagles to their children on a whim. During times of peace, it wasn't so difficult to find a relative willing to provide one, but kingeagles were in demand now that we were gearing up for war. No one was stupid enough to let a child borrow the same bird they'd need to rely on in battle.

"That's true. I've already looked into how many of the students are from families of sky knights, and it didn't give me much hope. Even those that *do* have a kingeagle might have it taken away by their family. That said, even those from low-ranking knight families with no sky knights might find a way to get hold of an eagle. In fact, I've already had several students ask whether they're allowed to borrow a kingeagle from a fellow student."

Borrowing an eagle from a friend was certainly an option. If there were

kingeagle owners whose grades didn't meet the requirements, then begging them for their eagle wasn't a bad idea.

Personally, I wouldn't dream of letting anyone borrow Stardust, but to some students their bird was just a tool that they didn't mind sharing.

"Sounds like we're going to have a bunch of students who meet the requirements but can't get hold of an eagle in time for departure," I said.

I guessed that a lot of people who'd told us they'd take a kingeagle along had just assumed they'd be able to find one later.

"Yes, I can imagine some students will tell us in the interview that they're taking a kingeagle, then they'll show up with a plainrunner on the day of departure. We need to decide how we'll deal with that," Myalo said.

Students with a plainrunner could come along too, but they wouldn't actually be able to observe a battle from the air. In a sense, there wasn't much reason for those students to come with us. On the other hand, taking part would be an important achievement for their record.

"There's only one way we can deal with it," I replied. "We'll turn those students away. If we make an exception for one student, the rest will demand similar treatment. That'd be bad for morale."

"Yes, it would. I agree with you."

"Let's make that clear to everyone in the interviews."

"I'll add it to the list of questions."

She even put a list of questions together?

Even if we ended up using a revised version, having a list that I could use as a starting point would make my life easier. As always, I was glad to have Myalo around.

"What's Liao doing, by the way?"

"He's procuring wagons and carts, and also answering questions from applicants."

I see.

If I were alone, I could easily buy food at each town I passed along the way just like I'd done over the past few days. That wouldn't work for a group of dozens of people, though. A group of our size couldn't expect each town to provide several days' worth of food under such short notice, and we definitely couldn't force it from them. That meant taking our own food was the only option. We'd be using horse-drawn wagons for that purpose.

Kingeagles couldn't walk across long distances, so it would be up to a plainrunner cavalry to escort and manage the wagons. That meant we'd need several plainrunners with us too.

"We'll hold a meeting this evening," I said. "I'm sure he's got thoughts to share."

"All right. Should I call Princess Carol also?"

Oh, that's right. We can't keep leaving her out of everything.

"Yeah. We'll meet up at..."

Choosing the place wasn't easy. It felt weird to use a teahouse, we couldn't take Carol to a tavern, and I didn't want to use the dorm either. Most people there weren't taking part, so we couldn't act like we owned the place.

"How about an empty classroom in the academy?" Myalo suggested. "The academy staff are surprisingly cooperative. The head of the Knight Academy is Liao's uncle, after all."

"Oh, that's right."

I hadn't considered that. I'd known he was a Rube, but not that he was Liao's uncle.

"I'll ask to borrow a key," Myalo said. "I can also arrange for some food and drinks. We can have it brought to us."

"Can I leave that to you? I'm going to go over these documents. Call me when it's time."

"All right."

Myalo stood up and quickly left the dining hall.



“Hey. Long time no see.” Liao sounded carefree as he entered the classroom and greeted me.

“Hey.”

“You’re eating here?”

I was in the classroom that Myalo had arranged, eating one of the sandwiches prepared for us as a substitute for dinner.

“What? You had dinner already?” I asked him.

“Yeah.”

Liao strolled over, but hesitated for just a moment before sitting down opposite of me.

There were four chairs around the table. He was probably wondering which one to leave free for Carol.

Myalo poured a cup of tea, then pushed it toward him. “Here you are.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“It’s cold, but we don’t have serving staff, so it’ll have to do,” she said.

The tea was in a pot that had been brought here along with the sandwiches, wrapped in a thick cloth to insulate it. It was probably a little warm still, but not much.

“So, we’re here to talk about tomorrow’s interviews?” Liao asked as he sipped his tea.

“That’s the main topic, yeah,” I replied.

“In that case, there’s something I wanted to ask,” Liao said.

“You want to make sure certain students are chosen for the unit, right?”

“Good guess,” Liao said, not sounding particularly surprised.

I’d already heard about this before my visit to Kilhina. There was a student born to a high-ranking knight family that served the Rube family, and he’d been one of Liao’s best friends in his dorm ever since they’d joined the academy.

Unfortunately, he was four credits shy of the requirements. Liao wanted him with us regardless.

I'd agreed. Four credits wasn't much, and it was clear from what I'd heard that Liao hoped this student would become a close ally of his someday in the future.

There was only one student that he wanted badly enough to make us bend the rules, but there had to be others who he hoped would pass the interview.

"I'm willing to make allowances based on the Rube family's circumstances, but don't overdo it. This isn't our own personal unit. We can't stuff it with Ho and Rube supporters. If that's your thinking, I won't allow it." I wanted to make this clear.

"Yeah, I know."

"If someone doesn't pass, then they don't pass, even if they're the eldest son of some lord-of-estates serving my family. If we pick weak students who haven't shown much potential, people will think we're just choosing people based on their family name. We'll be risking our lives out there—accepting them wouldn't be doing them a favor."

Lord-supreme was the title given to the head of a chieftain family, and the next rank down was lord-of-estates. It was generally given to hereditary vassals. Needless to say, being from one of those important families was no indicator of talent.

"Yeah, I get that. Obviously, I won't ask you to let in some idiot who's useless to us. I'm talking about people I really trust here, and no one earns my trust through their family name alone."

Fair enough.

"Okay then, that's fine...but let's wait for Carol before we go any further."

"Suppose we should," Liao agreed.

After we'd eaten one or two snacks and waited a while, Carol appeared.

"Sorry I'm late," she said.

"Sit," I instructed her.

Carol looked annoyed for a moment, but then she obeyed and took a seat as if she'd just remembered that I was the commanding officer here.

"Let's talk about the selection process. I want to set it up so we end up with about sixty people."

"Uh... Really?" Carol said in surprise.

"Don't tell me... You haven't been promising everyone you talk to that they can join us, have you?"

If Carol herself had been assuring everyone that they just needed to meet the requirements and that the interview was just a formality, we'd have a real mess on our hands.

"Do you think I'm stupid? I wouldn't do that. I'm just surprised that you're planning on rejecting more than half the applicants, that's all."

"I've seen the area myself, and things are pretty bad over there. I don't think we'll be able to do anything more than view a battle from our kingeagles. Anything else, like finding a nice hill for our plainrunner riders to watch from, is out of the question. They'll just bump into enemy scouts and some of us will get killed when we're drawn into the fighting. There's no point in us taking a lot of students who don't have kingeagles."

"Okay... I get how it is. Sixty... The students will be in for some tough interviews."

"Well, we're choosing students to represent the academy here. Of course we have to hold them to high standards," I said, making up an excuse on the spot.

"Yeah, that's true," Carol agreed.

It was the kind of reasoning she was likely to go along with.

"Now let's talk about the provisions," I said. "I know you've heard it all in the lectures, but provisions are always limited in a war. Soldiers won't cooperate happily if they've gone a whole day without food, and a kingeagle can't carry anyone on its back if it hasn't eaten for two days. Finding enough food for sixty people isn't a problem anywhere here in Shiyalta, but the turmoil in Kilhina means it'll be a struggle to procure food each day without fail. And the lecturers

have told us time and time again what it means to run out of food.”

One of the lecturers here at the Knight Academy was a former knight who’d once been in charge of logistics. He’d taught us about provisions in fine detail. Students in lower years were taught the fundamentals, while higher students practiced at their desks by pretending to manage the logistics for a campaign with limited funding. They’d calculate values representing the resources they could buy with their funds, then calculate the decrease in those values with each passing day. Sometimes the lecturer would have us plan for impossible scenarios, such as one where the enemy attacked a supply train, depleting our horses, carts, and resources.

“If we fly over there with a few kingeagles, sixty people, and no plan, just two days of failing to find new provisions will be enough to ensure we can’t make it home. If it comes to that, we’ll have to beg for help from actual soldiers who are risking their lives in battle. You don’t need me to tell you that few people manage to humiliate themselves that badly. The knights in Kilhina would be laughing about us for years to come.”

I could tell from Carol’s expression that she was picturing the scenario.

Liao was listening with his eyes closed.

Naturally, Myalo was wearing the same expression she always wore.

“Let’s plan our provisions carefully so that doesn’t happen. Obviously, we’ll have to obtain them and transport them ourselves. This operation is all about gaining experience, and managing provisions is an important part of that.”

Liao raised his hand.

“Speak,” I said, giving him permission.

“My old man said he’ll help us out if we run out of provisions.”

“That’s good to know. Tell him we’ll be counting on him if things don’t go according to plan.”

“You’re sure?”

Liao looked at me like he was surprised I was willing to put myself in the Rube family’s debt so easily.

“I won’t ask him for help from day one, but no one can predict what’ll happen. We could be forced to abandon everything we’ve got while running from a wildfire, or a flash flood could strike while we’re crossing a river, taking half our supply train with it. No matter how carefully we prepare, there’s always a chance of something unforeseen.”

“Mh... You might be right.”

“Okay. I want the students who don’t bring a kingeagle—the ones riding plainrunners—to make sure our supplies get there safely. Liao, I’d like you to oversee it all.”

“Ah... I figured you’d give me that job,” Liao said while scratching his head.

“Obviously, just because you’re traveling there by plainrunner doesn’t mean you can’t ride a kingeagle later. You can lend your eagle to someone else so that they’ll transport it for you. Likewise, if there’s a kingeagle rider you trust, and you want to have them be part of the provisions company with you, then I’d be okay with that. Having a close friend around could make your job a whole lot easier.”

“All right... In that case, leave it to me.”

“Thanks. It’s a real help.”

That’s a relief. I just gave him the worst task.

“As I’m sure you can imagine, whoever’s in charge will need some understanding of the geography in Kilhina. That makes you the ideal person.”

“True. I don’t know every inch of Kilhina, but I *have* traveled over land to Reforme and back a few times. I’ve got a good sense for the roads and the climate.”

It sounded like I could rely on him. I thought he’d be reluctant to take on such a thankless responsibility, but he didn’t seem to mind. I wouldn’t have to talk him into it.

“We’ll need to decide which roads to take after we find out which ones the other units are using... Anyway, our final destination is already decided—a village called Nikka.”

“Nikka?” Carol echoed. She knew the region fairly well, but she wasn’t familiar with the name.

“I wouldn’t expect you to know it. Nikka isn’t a famous city, or even a town. It’s just a little village.”

It was a completely *unremarkable* little village, in fact, so only a specialist would know the name.

“We’ll base the observation unit there. I’ll give you maps showing how to reach it from Reforme.”

“Why’d you choose that place?” Carol asked.

“First, it’s in the evacuation zone, so all the residents have cleared out already. Second, it’ll be easy to fly from there to the site where the main battle is expected to occur. Third, it’s a little off the main road connecting the royal capital of Reforme to Verdun Fortress, so we won’t block the movement of friendly forces or find ourselves surrounded by enemies while staying there. That’s why.”

“Okay... But now I’ve got another question.”

What more does she want to know?

“If there are no residents, then who’ll provide for our kingeagle company? Even if we know what day we’ll all arrive there, Liao’s going to be making a long trip with the supply train. He’ll be a week behind us, won’t he?”

She’s sure paying attention to all the little details.

“I’ve already made arrangements. There were still people in Nikka when I visited. I stocked up on as much non-perishable food as I could and rented a house to store it all. We should have enough food to feed sixty people for two weeks.”

“Ah... You sure didn’t cut any corners. That’s just like you.”

She looked pleased with the job I was doing as expedition leader, but knowing how empty-headed she could be, I wasn’t going to take that praise to heart.

“Who’s going to procure the resources we’re carrying with us?” Liao asked.

“Myalo will handle that. Getting all the little details right is her specialty.”

“Yes, sir. Please leave it to me.”

It was the first time she’d said anything the whole meeting.

“All right. So if Myalo’s handling provisions...does that mean she’s with me?” Liao asked.

“Ah...”

It was only now that I realized I hadn’t thought about that at all.

“I’ll follow whatever orders Yuri gives me. But I must warn you that I won’t be able to ask someone to take my eagle there for me. Sadly, I don’t have a friend I can trust with such a task.”

Myalo didn’t own a kingeagle, but the plan was that the Ho family would secretly loan her one. It sounded like an admission of loneliness when she said she didn’t have a friend who could look after it.

“I can handle that arrangement myself,” Liao said. “None of my followers are as attentive to small details as Myalo. Besides, I realize she’s like your right hand, Yuri. I’d like her there to advise me if anything goes wrong.”

So if he runs into trouble, he’ll stop to consult with her before he handles it?

He might’ve wanted to share the liability. If we lost our supplies because of a mistake that he’d made, I’d probably be angry, but not nearly as much if he’d been doing everything he could by listening to Myalo’s advice. I had trust in her decision-making.

“In that case, I’ll assign Myalo to handle provisions. Moving the kingeagles should take three days, four at most. It wouldn’t make sense to have three of us assigned to that easy task while you’re left to oversee the difficult work by yourself.”

It would probably take a fortnight to make the trip on land. It couldn’t be more obvious who’d have the harder journey.

“All right, I’ll appreciate your help,” Liao said.

“Understood,” Myalo replied.

“Okay... That’s enough talk about the provisions. Now let’s talk about selecting personnel,” I said, changing the topic.

“Liao has offered us fifteen recommendations,” Myalo said while producing a piece of paper.

It looked like a list of serial numbers. I remembered that the evaluation documents Myalo had given me earlier all had similar numbers on them.

“I’ll go over these later. The problem is this guy.”

I placed a piece of paper on the desk. Dolla Godwin’s name was written on it. Myalo must’ve valued him for his athletic ability, because she’d given him the number 107.

The biggest surprise for me was that he’d obtained over 250 credits. In addition, he was currently taking a final-level practical skills class—Advanced Hand-to-Hand Combat IV—which put him three levels ahead of his peers. He’d also racked up a good number of credits in optional classes like archery.

“What about him?” Liao asked. He didn’t know about the situation with Dolla.

“He shares a dorm room with me and Carol.”

“Ah...” Liao nodded like that had explained it all.

“I’d call him a friend in a sense. He’s a hardworking guy who spends all his time swinging training weapons around. He’s never even attempted the sky knight program, by the way.”

“I can see he’s got the skills we need.” Liao was impressed by Dolla’s record.

“I was thinking we should leave this up to Carol.”

“Me?” Carol reacted with surprise.

I looked at her. “I’m letting you decide whether he joins us or not. Reject him if you don’t want him, but if you’re letting him join us, make the decision now without setting conditions.”

“But...”

“I know he’d die for you without a second thought. That’s why I’m letting you decide whether he joins and what he’ll do for us.”

I'd decided on this the moment I'd seen his name.

Not only would he die for her, it was what he *wanted*. Carol must've sensed it herself to some extent. If Dolla came with us, she wouldn't be able to take risks because she might kill him in the process. I'd decided that he'd be like a shackle, reining in her reckless behavior.

"Okay, let him join us. But..."

Well, that was decided easily.

I waited for her to finish her sentence, but she fell silent.

Eventually she concluded, "No... I want Dolla with us."

She'd repeated herself for some reason. It was as if she didn't like the wording she'd used the first time.

"All right. That's decided then. Is there anything else anyone wants to discuss?" I asked.

No one raised their hand. Everyone seemed satisfied for now.

"Then let's end here. Tomorrow we'll hold the interviews. I share my dorm room with two straitlaced students, but make sure yours don't keep you up late, Liao."

"You're a lucky one," Liao said, surprised.



As we approached the dorm, I told Carol to go wait in the dining hall or somewhere similar.

"Huh...? Is something wrong?"

"The meathead's in our room. I want to talk to him."

A moment ago, Dolla had stepped out onto the dorm's balcony and seen us approaching. He'd quickly gone back inside the moment he spotted us. Carol hadn't noticed, but my eyes were sharp.

"Ah... Okay."

"We've given him special treatment by deciding to accept him before his

interview. I need to make sure he keeps quiet about it.”

“Please do.”

Okay, here goes.

I walked into the dorm and headed up to the second floor without Carol. I entered our room and found Dolla there. He hadn’t run away.

“Hey.”

“H-Hey...”

“Do you have a moment to talk about something?”

“Okay...”

Why’s this guy always so gloomy? You’d think a meathead who’s always spending time outdoors would be more cheery.

“It’s about the observation unit. We decided to accept you.”

“O-Oh. Good.”

The tension faded from his face, and he failed to hide his happiness.

“We’ve made the decision already, but you’ll still need to come for an interview. Half the interviewees are going to get rejected, so if it looks like we’ve given you special treatment, we’ll get complaints.”

“Got it. I’ll be there.”

“By the way, Carol was the one who said she wanted you with us.”

“Huh?” Dolla was shocked, like that was the last thing he’d expected.

“Since you can’t ride an eagle, you won’t be in the same company as her. Still, if she’s ever in trouble, you should run right to her.”

“Of course I will. For Her Highness, I’d go straight to my death.”

I felt like telling him I wasn’t asking him to die, but I held back. Perhaps he was under the impression that the way of the warrior was the way of death. If so, that was an extreme idea that he’d gotten into his head.

“Make sure you keep your spear sharp. You might want to practice riding horses too.”

He'd actually end up riding in the driver's seat of a horse-drawn wagon, but people often found it surprisingly difficult to ride a horse once they'd gotten used to a plainrunner.

"All right. I will."

"I'm not sure why..."

I was about to say I wasn't sure why Carol wanted him with us, but I held my tongue. There wasn't any point in saying that.

Liao would have his followers with him. Likewise, Carol might've wanted someone who was entirely loyal to her. Somehow, though, it felt different.

I struggled to understand the relationship Carol had with Dolla. It was like there was something between them that could neither be spoken nor written in words.

"What?" Dolla urged me to go on when I fell silent.

I was evasive. "It's nothing. Forget it."

With that, I left the room.

II

April 17.

It was day three of the interviews, and the last of our 179 interviewees had just left, bringing an end to the process. The sun was already low in the sky.

We breathed a collective sigh of relief now that it was over.

"We're finally done..."

Exhaustion hit us.

These young students had all prepared paperwork declaring that they were ready to risk their lives. We'd had to interview each one thoroughly—a mentally exhausting task.

"The plan was to finish the interviews this morning so we could have a lengthy meeting in the afternoon, but...that didn't happen, did it?" Myalo

asked.

The schedule she'd put together now looked like wishful thinking. We'd gotten through all the interviews, but we wouldn't be able to hold a meeting to share our assessments of each interviewee.

I'd conducted interviews as part of Ho Company in the past, but I'd never done this many in such a short time span. I hadn't expected it to be so grueling. It was only now that I remembered that I usually left narrowing the candidates down to Caph, who had more experience.

Thanks to him, I'd never done more than twenty interviews in a day. Seeing over fifty people in a single day just wasn't reasonable.

"We could delay the departure by a day," Liao suggested. "I've been thinking we'll probably need more than a week to prepare, or the unit members could feel rushed. And I'm still worried about the provisions."

The current plan was for the supply train to depart under Liao's command on the 24th, which was a week from today.

Since we'd be announcing the interview results a day late, it made sense to delay everything else too. We'd have to take into account people's days off, but that wouldn't be difficult.

"Okay... Let's do that," I agreed. "I already felt we were rushing things too much."

I'd come up with a schedule based on my scouting. There'd be a violent clash of two opposing forces when the war broke out, which meant that real soldiers would be dispatched from Shiyalta in preparation. That would cause a traffic jam on the bridges. Since we were going there to watch, I wanted us to get there before it all started. Still, we could afford a day's delay.

And there was another reason why a delay would be in my favor.

I looked over at Carol and noticed that, rather than participating in the discussion, she was intently writing on some sort of document on the desk.

"Carol...? What are you doing?"

"I'm going over my evaluation criteria again, just to check that it's all

sensible.”

During the interviews, Carol had been focused on asking questions and listening to everything closely. She’d been making notes on a piece of paper in front of her the whole time. Now it seemed she was reconsidering the criteria she’d used.

I got the sense that her attention kept wandering. Perhaps it was due to fatigue, but she was knitting her brow as she studied the document before her.

“Give up. If you try to rewrite your assessments without the person in front of you, you’ll just make them worse. And the applicants won’t want you forming new impressions of them based on written text alone.”

It would’ve helped a lot if we’d had photographs of the applicants, like back in Japan, but we hadn’t collected any likenesses or anything of the sort. It wasn’t possible to recall what type of person someone was based on a few lines of text. As the one doing the recruiting, I’d learned how important it was to have photographs on the applications.

“You’re right. I’ll stop.”

I’d convinced her to put down her pen. She began rubbing her brow, clearly tired.

“How about we finish for the day?” I suggested before getting up from my seat. “I’d like you all to get some good rest.”



Now that my schedule was empty for the day, I ruminated on my options. Eventually, I decided to head for Ms. Ether’s office.

I hadn’t spoken to her at all since the day Her Majesty had asked me to join the expedition. I wasn’t sure what I was going to say to her.

When I knocked on her door, a clear voice beckoned me inside.

“Pardon me,” I said as I opened the door.

I was surprised to find that she already had a guest—a girl from the Cultural Academy. The student turned to look at me, then reacted with surprise as if she recognized me.

“Ah... I can come back later if you’re busy,” I said.

“No, I’m not too busy. But unless there’s an emergency, could you wait until I’ve answered this girl’s question?”

“Of course. I don’t mind waiting.”

I sat down on a nearby chair.

“You see how the verb goes with this part? Since the subject is third-person female, we conjugate it like this. And the relative adverb is referring to this part of the text... Do you understand now?”

“Ah, ummmm...”

She’s getting really nervous for someone who’s just asking a teacher some questions. It’s almost like a celebrity just walked in. Please tell me those erotic books aren’t giving everyone crazy ideas about me...

“So he said Neeko and Rou spent some time together when they met, but he was lying... Am I interpreting it right?”

“Yes, exactly. Well done.”

“Oh! Th-Thank you!”

The girl bowed her head, then blurted out, “Sorry for interrupting you!”

With that, she darted out of the room.

Was she saying that to me or Ms. Ether...?

“It’s nice to see you, Yuri.” Ms. Ether greeted me once more as she put away the book that had been open on the desk.

“I’m sorry for not visiting more often, Ms. Ether.”

Her appearance had changed with age since I’d first met her eight years ago, but her personality was always the same. She dealt with the outside world carefully, always proving thoughtful and attentive to her surroundings, but without ever appearing fussy.

There wasn’t a hint of anything unnatural in her intonation when she spoke Shanish these days. In fact, she had a broader vocabulary than most Shanti people.

She walked by me and approached the door while I remained seated. She opened it just a little, flipped the sign on the outside to indicate that she was busy, then closed it again.

“There usually isn’t anyone here asking questions at this time of day,” I said.

“It’s not as rare lately,” Ms. Ether replied, returning to her seat. “People come to see me quite often. My classroom also grew much busier this year. The course has also been split into basic and advanced levels, so students pass it more easily now.”

Her Kulatish course looked to be gaining in popularity, the once-deserted classroom often filled up with students now.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, and I have you and Harol to thank for it.”

Ah, right. I can guess what happened.

Since it was common knowledge that Ho Company was making large profits, some observant and enterprising auditing students were bound to take up the Kulatish course.

I bowed my head. “I’m sorry for making your office so busy.”

Ms. Ether had an office to herself, and it suited her to sit and think about God and history here. People used to rarely visit, so I felt a little sad knowing that the calm nature of this room had been lost now that students visited regularly.

She was quick to dismiss my concerns, however. “Oh... No, not at all! I don’t think it’s a bad thing. I enjoy teaching people, so don’t mind at all.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

“I really mean it.”

Ms. Ether used her hand to straighten out her hair a little.

“And when former students like yourself come to visit me too, I couldn’t be happier.”

Does she really mean that?

It wouldn’t be like Ms. Ether to lie about being happy. At the very least, she

clearly wasn't going about her work in a sour mood.

"There's actually something I'd like to tell you," I said.

"Oh... I think I can guess what it is."

It probably wasn't so much guessing—more that someone had already told her about it.

"I'm going to be going away for a while. Her Majesty requested that I go to observe a battle."

"Yes, indeed. I mostly keep to myself, but that bit of news reached even me. Please take care of yourself."

The rumor must've spread quite far if it'd even reached Ms. Ether. The observation unit itself wasn't all that surprising—what made it a piece of juicy gossip was that Carol would be participating.

Carol was heir to the throne and still a student. For someone like that to go to war was a major event. It was completely unheard of.

"I'm sure I'll be fine, but please take care of yourself, Ms. Ether. We can't be sure people won't direct their anger at you once the war begins. Make sure to always lock your doors..."

"Yes, you're right. I'll be careful."

"Good."

"Um, I wasn't sure whether I should say this to you, Yuri, but..."

"What is it?" I asked.

Ms. Ether looked nervous for a moment, then began to speak. "If you're ever captured, find someone from the Catholica Papal State and tell them you know the whereabouts of Ether Wichita and you'll bring her to them in exchange for your release. You might be able to negotiate a deal. I wouldn't mind if you did that in a time of need."

Um... Now that's an odd idea. Why would she be wanted so badly?

"Sadly, I'm not just a knight—I'm the eldest son of a chieftain family. I doubt they'd let me go."

Even if my captor wasn't observant enough to realize who I was, they'd need a hostage or some other sort of collateral before they agreed to such a deal. No one would be stupid enough to let me go without some sort of assurance. Perhaps it would work in a scenario where Carol and I were captured together, and I was released while she was kept as the hostage... But I didn't even want to imagine that.

"Oh, any clergy member will flinch the moment you mention my name. They wouldn't be able to harm you for a while."

"They wouldn't?"

What? Why wouldn't they?

"I'm considered a major heretic in their world. My heresy earned me the title 'The Beast' in the Papal State. It's given only to those who are a major threat to faith in the church, so whoever catches me is guaranteed to be canonized after their death."

Just how much mayhem did she cause over there?

Canonization made one a saint in the religion of Yeesusism. The status only applied after death, but saints were often revered by churches established in their name, and their former belongings were sometimes regarded as sacred objects to be traded at high prices. Then again, even saints varied in terms of popularity; a minor saint that no one had heard of wouldn't get any churches built in their name. Regardless, all saints were still afforded a special status by the faithful that made them the envy of anyone devout enough to believe in the afterlife.

"Ah, I see..."

"Even if they refuse to negotiate, protocol demands that they contact Gilmaresque Cathedral and await further instruction from the archbishop in that jurisdiction. At the very least, you'd be safe for a little while."

I hadn't heard of Gilmaresque Cathedral, but I could guess by the name that it was located in Gilmaresque of the Tyrelme Holy Empire.

I had a rough idea of the location because it was a major city. From Kilhina, it would take about a month to get there on horseback. Being given a month to

live could make all the difference in a dire situation.

Still, I wasn't so sure I'd be unharmed—my captors could easily decide that, rather than negotiating with me, they'd obtain her location through torture.

"But isn't there a military bishop taking part in every crusade...? Would they really need to send word all the way to Gilmaresque?"

"Yes. A military bishop is still just a bishop; they're no archbishop. Though it's true that anyone chosen is likely to be influential in the future..."

"Then why don't they send someone higher ranking? They must struggle to function when all the real authority figures are so far away."

If the person capable of making all the important decisions was a month's ride away, it had to be a massive inconvenience. On the other hand, such irregular situations—ones which specifically required special instruction from someone that high ranking—might've been rare in practice.

"The problem is that archbishops and anyone higher tend to be very old, so they don't like making long trips into the cold northern region. During the great crusades of old, the pope himself would take part, but now... Well, I can't imagine it. Even the cardinals are busy governing Vaticanus and won't want to leave the comfort of their posts."

That made sense. Warriors like knights and kings who trained on a daily basis could handle such trips, but anyone who'd grown old in a monastery would find the journey north on horseback rather challenging.

"I understand. I'll remember what you said, just in case."

Not that I ever want to resort to that.

"Yes, please do," she replied with a relieved smile.

"Also... I'm not sure I should even ask, but you just called yourself Ether Wichita. I seem to remember your surname was Vino..."

"Yes, that's a false name," Ms. Ether explained without any hesitation.

If she's as notorious as she claims, I suppose she'd have to use a false name.

Vino was a Terolish noun that meant "wine." Harol was rapidly importing the

stuff here on our ships—alongside cotton, it was one category of products that my company traded in. For the past nine hundred years, it had been like a mythical drink that was mentioned in written accounts, but had never been drunk by the Shanti.

The history of wine aside, it was the sort of surname you might expect a farmer to have. It was an odd choice of name for someone as highly educated as Ms. Ether.

I'd started suspecting that she was using a false name ever since I'd witnessed her carry out the sacrament for Harol. She mustn't have wanted to give away her identity too readily back when she'd entered our kingdom, hoping to hide away.

"Given that my name could prove useful to traitors, I was told to use a false name when I first arrived here. I'd like it if we could keep my real name between us."

It sounded like Ms. Ether was putting herself at great risk just by suggesting the idea to me. She'd be in considerable danger the moment her real name was revealed. Despite that, she'd shared it with me so that I could possibly use it to save my life.

If I were to come home and tell her, "Sorry, but Carol got captured. Do you think you could trade yourself for her?" I knew she'd gladly agree, even though it'd mean her death.

What did I do to deserve such good treatment?

"I'll never tell," I promised her. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"You certainly don't need to die over it," Ms. Ether said with an amused smile.

"I won't forget your kindness. Thank you."

"It's no kindness—I accepted my death when I fled my post. My life is yours to use as you see fit."

Knowing she came here willing to die is hardly reassuring.

"I don't know what happened in Vaticanus, but you're alive now, and I owe you a lot. I'd appreciate it if you didn't do anything to squander the life you

have.”

It was clear from her troubled expression that my words had had an effect on her.

“Yes, you’re right. If I ask you to make use of my life while showing a disregard for it myself, I might not sound very convincing.”

That’s hardly the issue... Well, whatever.

“Please look after yourself,” I told her.



“Now, if you don’t mind me changing the subject...”

“What is it?” Ms. Ether asked.

“You might not like the sound of it, but I had a business idea. Would you be interested in...possibly translating the holy scripture and providing a few translation notes?”

“Oh? You mean...into contemporary Shanish?”

Ms. Ether was apparently imagining a Shanish translation of the holy scripture.

“No, into Terolish. The truth is, Harol Harrell is doing a great job of establishing trade with the Albio Republic, so I thought it might be worth printing a translated version of the holy scripture that we could export there. Maybe if we were to enlighten people about the book’s true teachings, attitudes might begin to change with time.”

“But...where would you sell it? I can’t imagine anyone would buy it...”

Ms. Ether clearly had no experience in the trade of goods.

“It’ll sell everywhere that Yeesusism is practiced. The Albio Republic has connections to black market trade all across the world. We can use Ho paper and our printing technology to produce copies that’re much cheaper than their parchment counterparts. If the book’s cheap, it’ll sell—that’s just how the market works. Given the constant demand for the holy scripture, it should sell incredibly well, in fact.”

Based on my own research, plant-based paper existed overseas, but printing technology didn't. Owning a copy of the holy scripture was a mark of status in foreign countries, so I imagined that people would rush to buy it from us. The buyers would, of course, want the officially sanctioned translation of the holy scripture, not some new one by Ms. Ether, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Naturally, people would get a little upset if they knew their holy book was being manufactured in the Shiyalta Kingdom, but we wouldn't tell them that.

"I hate to say it, but...any faithful translation by me would soon be branded heretical. There's nothing we can do to stop the book from being forbidden and burned."

Yep, that's right. A translation by Ms. Ether's going to get right under the church's skin.

Interpretations of the holy scripture set by the church were known as creeds in religious terminology. These creeds were adopted following ecumenical councils attended by the high clergy of Yeesusism.

To give an example: was Yeesus the son of God? Was he a human possessed by God's will, and thus given the power to bring about miracles? Or was he God's incarnation here on our planet? The scripture didn't give a definitive answer.

This sort of ambiguity meant that the teachings provided by each church were likely to vary, causing those who preached the religion to contradict each other.

Adherent A might one day decide that, rather than their usual church B, they'd go to church C. When the teachings preached there didn't match up with what they'd heard in church B, they'd ask for an explanation, only to be declared a heretic by horrified church C clergy. As Yeesusism expanded its sphere of influence, the scenario had become all too common.

To counter the problem, a pope in the distant past had held an ecumenical council made up of the wisest clergy members. There, they had settled on an interpretation that said that Yeesus was not a son born to God with independent will—he was God himself. That became their collective opinion. Anyone who refused to accept this interpretation would then be cast out as a heretic.

Ever since then, an ecumenical council would be convened whenever a dispute arose. They weren't regular events, however—barring any troubles, they occurred hundreds of years apart.

The modern day teachings of Catholica layered these council decisions on one another like the pastry of a pie and simply dispensed with any of the old decisions that they deemed inconvenient.

Through Ms. Ether's teachings, I'd gotten a surface-level understanding of the Catholica sect, the Me sect, and the differences between the two. I knew that the Me sect interpreted the holy scripture quite differently and taught that many core creeds were mistaken. Any holy scripture produced by her ideologies was bound to rub the Papal State the wrong way.

But that wouldn't happen quickly.

In states that lacked complex social systems, there was a significant time lag between problems occurring on the nation's outskirts and the news reaching the inner regions of the nation.

The Papal State would be the ones who judged whether the book was heresy, so we could delay its discovery by selling copies across a ring-shaped region that avoided the Papal State at the center.

I also knew of people in the Albio Republic who could be paid to quietly investigate the Papal State, so we could hold off on selling the book there until we'd heard that it had already been banned.

"I'll worry about that later," I told her. "If it doesn't sell, we can stop printing it. Rather than calling it proselytizing, we can think of it as creating a path to enlightenment. If we print thousands of copies, then some of them will survive no matter how many they try to burn. Your ideas might not be accepted today, but just think—what if someone discovers a copy hundreds of years from now? Maybe there'll be people who'll share them in the future... Doesn't that sound interesting?"

Ms. Ether appeared to like the sound of that, as if the concept excited her...as it should have.

Though she was no scientist, it was only natural for someone who enjoyed

thinking to want the results of their efforts to be shared with the world. Everyone, no matter who they were, wanted to leave their mark on the world. It was sad to imagine that one would someday be gone without a trace.

I'd expected Ms. Ether to jump at the opportunity, but her smile quickly faded. She remained silent for about ten minutes. I couldn't guess what was on her mind, but I knew she was thinking about something. I kept quiet, refusing to disturb her.

After a long period of silence, she softly said, "This is a big decision for me."

"How so?" I hadn't thought it would pose such a dilemma. "I realize that translation can be time-consuming work..."

"It's not that."

So there's something else?

She looked much more serious than she had a short while ago.

"If the book is banned, then anyone who owns it will be branded a heretic," she explained. "They could try handing it over to the church immediately, but even that could arouse suspicion. It could lead to people being imprisoned, or even executed."

Ah, that's the issue.

From my point of view, that would all just be someone else's problem. If anything, I'd *welcome* that sort of chaos among the Kulati. Ms. Ether, however, saw it differently.

Well, she's not wrong...

"You're right... I hadn't considered how much that would mean to you. Okay, if you don't like the idea, I'm happy to drop it."

"No, you're right that causing a stir within the Catholica sect would be good for several reasons. I think this may be worth it, even when I consider the downsides."

She still sounded keen to try, but I couldn't guess how she really felt, or what sort of pros and cons she had to weigh out specifically.

“I feel like I have to make the correct decision here. I’ve already failed at this once and ruined so many lives in the process. But perhaps it would be weak of me to make that my reason for giving up.”

I wanted to tell her that she was overthinking things, but I held my tongue. It was her decision to make based on her own judgment, after all, and I knew that a great woman like her wouldn’t take it lightly.

Besides, I wasn’t planning to pressure her into it if she refused. Right from the start, I’d half expected her to object to the idea of selling the book to make money. If she had, I was going to drop the idea.

“You don’t need to decide today. We can talk when I get back.”

“No... I’ll decide now.”

Oh? O-Okay...

“But before I can trust you with the translated holy scripture of Me, there’s something I must ask you.”

That’s an unexpected turn. What’s she going to ask me? Is it like an exam question?

Having just interviewed a great number of people, I was surprised to find myself now sitting in the interviewee’s seat instead.

“Very well... What’s your question?”

“Why does war happen?” she asked.

Uh? I couldn’t help but frown.

It was such a vague question, but I knew this wasn’t a case of simple curiosity, like a child might ask. It was coming from none other than Ms. Ether. She had to have several thoughts of her own on this matter. Whatever answer I gave her, I’d have to be ready to defend it.

“Well... There are lots of reasons.”

“For example?”

It’s hard to choose...

“Herd mentality can be a factor, as can the economic conditions. Then there’s

geopolitical considerations, history, the state of the military... You could pick any field of study and use it to come up with a reason, but none of them would be the one true answer.”

“Go on.”

She wants more...? That's not enough for her?

“For example, suppose there’s economic disparity between two neighboring countries—that could spark a war. Neither the populace nor the rulers would enjoy watching their neighbor enjoy greater wealth. And if that neighbor lacks military might, then there’ll naturally be a temptation to invade. Well, that’s *one* obvious factor that can lead to the outbreak of war. But it’s merely a single factor; it’s not the whole story. Even if there’s no economic disparity and no feelings of envy or jealousy between the two nations, that still isn’t enough to rule out the possibility of war between them. The Xurxes Campaign, for example, was a war born out of completely different motivations.”

That's right...

The Xurxes Campaign was a great war that had occurred during the Middle Ages. The circumstances behind it weren’t complex—an event occurred that created antagonism between the two sides, and then when they couldn’t settle the dispute, it developed into a war. The dispute had all kicked off thanks to a scholar who’d gone poking about near the shore of the Mediterranean Sea and discovered the holy jerk who Ms. Ether had served in her previous job. The details weren’t important, but it was a good example to use in my answer to her question.

“That’s true... You’ve shown a good level of insight, but that’s not the answer I’m looking for. Well, I suppose the problem was with my question.”

Huh...? What in the world?

“Let me try a different question—what do you think we should do to end all war?”

“Again, that’s...”

Her new question left me speechless. I wondered why she was even asking me such a thing. Then again, I could recall hearing similar questions long ago.

I'd never heard it since being born into this world. The thought had never really occurred to the people here because war was everywhere. It was a question that the people of Japan discussed often, however.

I decided to give a straightforward, honest answer. If it meant that she wouldn't give me her translation of the Me sect holy scripture, then so be it.

"When one nation has control of the entire world, then perhaps war would stop for some time...but I don't think that's what you're asking. You want to know how war might be stopped permanently worldwide, don't you?"

"Yes, that's right."

That's a tough one. If there were an easy answer to that question, we wouldn't have wars in the first place.

I considered saying that war would stop when there was just one person left living, but I doubted she wanted me to answer the question like it was a riddle.

Hmm... I'd better think carefully.

"Long ago, there were people who said that there'd be no war if we rid the world of weapons and soldiers. If we define a war as a conflict between two armed forces, then yes, getting rid of armed forces would get rid of war...but that's not what you mean, is it?"

"Indeed, it isn't."

Figures.

"So then the question is how to stop conflicts themselves. Giving the problem some basic thought, two methods come to mind."

"There's more than one...? Please tell me."

"The first is an extension of the 'rid the world of weapons and soldiers' idea. I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that war wouldn't end just because there were no more weapons or soldiers—it would simply mean that people would invade and fight with their fists, even if they weren't part of an organized force. A person can still kill someone with their bare hands, and of course, they can steal. Weapons and soldiers are just inventions intended to make killing more efficient for the sake of winning wars, so eliminating these things wouldn't have

any effect on the fundamental causes of war. The *nature* of war would change, but it wouldn't go beyond that."

"But just now you said this was a way to eliminate war."

"Yes. Well, what I mean is, it's not enough. But it *could* work if we were to also take away people's arms, legs, teeth..." I continued on with the unrealistic hypothetical situation despite her troubled look. "Basically, if we were to take away all means of violence that humans have, then they obviously won't be able to hurt each other. That would end war."

"Well... If you were to do that for all of humanity, then yes."

"But, of course, humanity wouldn't be able to survive. We'd lose the battle with the natural world and become extinct. But if we were trying to end war by taking away all weapons, we'd have to take those other things too, or there'd be no point."

It was a ridiculous hypothetical that wasn't feasible in reality at any rate.

"I can accept your conclusion. It wouldn't be possible, but it works as a thought experiment."

As I'd expected, Ms. Ether wasn't particularly moved by this answer.

"The other method isn't to get rid of weapons and soldiers—it's to remove the *need* for them. In other words, we'd need to give people a means to solve their problems without violence."

"Yes, that would be wonderful."

Clearly, that was the kind of answer Ms. Ether actually wanted.

"But the reality is that many types of problems in this world are solved using violence. Men use violence against women to make them obey, and women use violence against their children in the same way. Thugs steal from others to satisfy their greed, and then violence is used to strip them of their freedom when they're arrested for it."

"Yes, that's right."

"But what we're envisioning here is a world where murder, theft, rape, and assault are gone from society, so there are fewer reasons to punish people and

no need for law enforcement. In a world like that, there'd clearly be no need for weapons or soldiers, and war would be gone."

"Yes. But do you think such a thing is possible?"

I guess that's what she really wanted to know.

I'd known sci-fi novels and movies where genetic engineering, man-made viruses, or nanomachines were used to change the fundamental nature of humans so that their brains weren't geared toward carrying out such actions. I couldn't say whether human technology would ever advance to that level, but supposing the advance of science never hit a limit, it could someday be possible to strip humans of their ability to wage war forever.

However, it wasn't possible yet. Besides, modifying human nature so that people didn't engage in war seemed unethical, and more than that, I hated the thought.

"I can't answer with a simple yes or no. I'd be lying if I said yes, but the possibility disappears if we say no. All we can do is work to make it a reality while also trying to reduce the incidence of war with time. That's the only path forward in my opinion."

This sort of conclusion wouldn't change things for the better or worse, but it was the only way I could sum up my thoughts.

"Now I understand your thinking very well, Yuri."

"You do?"

I guess she didn't like it... I'm still not sure what she wanted to hear instead, though.

"I'll put my heart into that translation," she said.

I don't get it. Now she sounds happy with me.

"Was the answer I gave good enough?"

"Yes. I just had to confirm something. The holy scripture can be used as a tool for disrupting society; I'm happy as long as that doesn't happen."

"Disrupting society"...?

“I know this doesn’t sound classy, but I’m just in this for the money. It’s not part of some intricate plot. I don’t have any lofty ideas about making the world a better place by spreading true religious beliefs either,” I pointed out.

I certainly wouldn’t be giving out copies for free.

“I understand. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with making money. It’s just that if a holy book is controlled by someone with impure—actually, I think the right word is *malicious*—intentions, then it becomes nothing but a tool for doing harm. I wouldn’t want to be the creator behind such a thing.”

It turned out that Ms. Ether had feared I might use the beliefs created by our sale of the Me sect’s holy scripture for my own personal gain, or for the benefit of the Shanti people.

“You probably think that I hate war, Yuri.”

“Well... Yes.”

That seemed obvious.

Yeesusism’s holy scripture didn’t condemn war, but it didn’t endorse it either. Even if it *did*, Ms. Ether would only accept it because of pressure from a higher authority. She wasn’t the type of clergy member who actively encouraged war for personal gain.

An outstanding member of the clergy like Ms. Ether wouldn’t do a thing like that.

“I know you have a way with words. If you just wanted to use me, you would’ve presented some dressed-up reasoning that would’ve appealed to me. Instead, you gave me your honest thoughts. That’s enough to reassure me that you’re not malicious.”

So if I’d used some twisted logic to describe a utopia, I would’ve failed.

“But...chaos overseas actually would be to my benefit. Right now we’re talking about a book that doesn’t exist, but once it starts selling, I could grow tempted to use it to my advantage.”

“That is true. In that case, I’ll make a request—please use the holy scripture I give you to bring happiness to the adherents of Yeesusism.”

Well, I can't say no now.

"All right; I will."

It had never been my intention of using the book in ways that went against her wishes. If she imposed limits, then I'd have to rein in my greed and use the book for its intended purpose only.

"Good," Ms. Ether said. "But this all depends on you getting home again safely, Yuri. I know I've said it already, but make sure you take care of yourself."

"Very well. I will."

I'd hate for Ms. Ether's hard work to go to waste.

"Now... Could you give me your hand?" Ms. Ether asked.

Hm?

I extended my right hand toward her.

Ms. Ether took my hand in hers and gripped it between them. Though her skin was dry, her palms felt warm.

I'll have to bring her some ointment next time I see her...

Ms. Ether crouched a little and kissed the back of my hand. It happened so suddenly that it caught me by surprise. She let me go the moment she took her lips away.

"That was for good luck. Please come back safe," Ms. Ether said with a light smile.

"I will."

I felt a little bit embarrassed as I left her office.



III

“Hey! Wait!” I yelled out as I hurried over.

Liao, who was on top of his plainrunner, looked back at the sound of my voice and frowned. “All units, halt!” he shouted.

With that, the movement of the provisions company stopped.

Liao got down from his plainrunner as a mark of respect toward his superior officer, and I did the same so that we could face each other on equal ground.

“I tried waiting, but you didn’t come. I was about to set out because everyone’s run out of patience. If you’re about to give them a grand speech now, it’s not going to go down very well,” he said quietly, so that the members of his company wouldn’t hear.

Behind him was a group of leather-armor-clad students on plainrunners.

I’d meant to give them a talk before they were to set out, but I hadn’t shown up. They’d waited so long that I was sure they were all thinking, *Screw that guy, let’s just go.*

Liao was right—if I acted all important and gave them a grand speech after being so tardy, it’d go down horribly.

“Sorry. There’s another wagon coming. It took me some time to get it ready,” I explained.

“A wagon? You didn’t mention it.”

“Because I didn’t think it would be ready on time.”

Behind the lines of students were horse-drawn wagons, and beyond those I could see another wagon approaching us.

“That’s the one. Think you can transport one more?” I asked.

“One more wagon won’t make much of a difference, but...”

“Yuri, what’s wrong?” Myalo asked as she approached us on a young, female plainrunner.

Her slender body was clad in thin leather armor. She was also wearing a large piece of chain mail over her left shoulder, which would provide extra protection over her heart. Her equipment was well-suited for her slim, feminine figure, and it wouldn't impede her movement. She'd probably stol—uh, *borrowed*—it from her family.

"There's some more luggage I want you to take. It arrived this morning."

It was actually *still* this morning, so it'd just arrived.

"It's not carrying food, so please don't touch the contents," I added.

"Very well," Myalo agreed.

"You mustn't let water or flames get anywhere near it. Don't even take the canvas off when you set up camp. If a spark were to land in the wagon, you'd regret it."

"All right, we'll be careful."

Managing resources was Myalo's specialty, so I assumed she'd be in charge of it. I felt better knowing it was in her hands.



After I'd given the provisions company a few words of encouragement, I returned to the dorm and went back to bed.

I'd been worrying about the cargo for two days now, so I felt exhausted.

I wouldn't be setting out with the kingeagle company for another thirteen days. I had several things to do in the meantime. I had spent the day visiting the port during the early hours, then did some more running around after that. I was exhausted, but it was hard to stop thinking about it all. The kingeagle company would be taking a shortcut by crossing the channel. To put it another way—if the peninsula was a bent arm, and the regular route went up the hand to the elbow and then the shoulder, then the shortcut would be like flying from the thumb straight to the shoulder.

But the route came with some risk. The sea would be beneath us, so if a kingeagle got into trouble along the way, it might crash-land and leave its rider to drown. Still, the risk of an accident *appeared* to be low—we wouldn't be

flying far enough to test a kingeagle's stamina, and crashing onto land would be just as deadly as into the sea. It was easy to assume that a flight across the channel was no big deal, but anyone who thought that was mistaken. The risk was actually *higher* because there'd be nowhere to land if any of our birds began to show signs of fatigue.

I lay in my bed thinking about the problem, and my thoughts soon grew hazy. Suddenly, I heard the sound of a door opening.

Who's that?

The haziness cleared instantly. I opened my eyes just a crack and noticed that Carol had entered.

I guess that makes sense.

Dolla and Myalo had both set out today, so Carol and I would be the only ones using this room. Any other visitor would have to be an assassin.

Well, all jokes aside, there *was* a chance of an assassin coming for me, so I'd had to check.

Carol and I were supposed to have given an encouraging speech to the students who'd set out today. I'd been really late, but Carol had probably arrived early and done her job properly. If I got up, she'd probably scold me for it, so I decided I'd pretend to be asleep.

"Are you sleeping?" Carol asked.

Yes, so I'm not going to answer.

If she wasn't just here to yell at me, she'd do whatever she had to do and leave.

Carol's footsteps were fairly loud as she approached. She came to a stop at my bedside.

What now? I hope she's not angry enough to wake me up with an axe kick. I don't think she would, but I can't rule it out.

"It's morning," she said softly.

Technically, yes, but it's almost lunchtime already. I'll bet that clock Lilly gave

me says it's about 11 a.m.

I had my eyes closed, so I had no idea what expression she was making. Without knowing, it was hard to guess her mood from her tone of voice alone.

If I just keep lying here like this, she'll probably go away.

We had nothing in particular to do, so she probably just wanted to fetch some clothes or a book from the room.

We spent about ten minutes like that.

That said, I had my eyes closed and couldn't check the clock, so my sense of time might've been way off. It might've only been five... Ten minutes spent reading a good book was completely different from ten minutes of a punishing training session, after all.

I still had no idea what she was doing. I'd kept my eyes firmly shut, so I had to guess from the sound alone. I couldn't hear pages turning, so I knew she wasn't reading a book.

Maybe there's some urgent news that she wants to tell me as soon as I wake up? Maybe she's just bored?

I couldn't be sure that she was looking at me. It was possible that she'd fallen asleep in her chair, or was playing a silent game... Something like cat's cradle, maybe.

Wow... This is making me restless. Pretending to sleep was a mistake. It's turning into a contest of endurance. I'll open my eyes and pretend I'm just waking up.

The second I had that thought, I felt something against my forehead—the gentle touch of Carol's fingertips. They moved back and forth, sweeping my hair out of my face.

Ugh...

As her fingers brushed against my skin, I couldn't stop my eyebrows from twitching.

Carol quickly jerked her hand away.

Now I've done it. I can't pretend I'm sleeping now.

I opened my eyes wide and sat up.

"Hm...? Carol?"

I looked at her and blinked a few times. I wanted her to think I'd just woken up.

Carol froze, like a petrified middle schooler whose parents had just walked in while they were engaged in a certain activity.

"Do you need something?" I asked.

"Ah, um... Y-Y-Y-Yeah! I do!"

Her reaction was entertaining.

"Did you just come in?" I asked.

"Th-That's right! J-Just this moment!"

Liar.

"What did you need?"

"Umm, well, ah, yeah... I f-forgot."

She forgot? I guess she didn't need anything the whole time.

Carol raised both of her hands in front of her. "Uh, wh-when I remember what it was, I'll come back!"

She made a hasty retreat from the room.

What was that all about?

Chapter 2 — The Departure

It was May 8.

I was about to set out along with a group of students in mismatching sets of leather armor and twenty-eight kingeagles.

Carol stood beside me, wearing a fine set of white leather armor that looked elegant without being gaudy. Whoever had designed the set had put care into the aesthetics while still paying attention to functional aspects, like the steel plate protecting the chest area. I wondered whether the leather used to make it had come from a white horse.

Beside her stood her cherished kingeagle, Mountain Haze.

We were in a fishing village known as Colepta, located seventy kilometers away from Sibiak.

Colepta was a common departure point for kingeagles crossing the bay. Though the village didn't have much industrial activity, there were inns here to cater to riders who needed a place to stay.

I'd led the kingeagle company out of Sibiak the day before, then arrived here in Colepta after a short flight. It was a good spot for some much-needed rest, though it wasn't for us humans—we needed our eagles in peak condition for what would come next.

Today, we were gathered on a flat area of land facing Colepta's shore.

"Just like you were informed, we'll be crossing the bay today. There are several things I'd like you all to remember. Your lives may depend on it, so listen carefully." With the preface out of the way, I began to explain. "Firstly, you can follow me in confidence knowing that I have prior experience making this trip. Also, if your eagle shows any sign that it's unwell after taking off, you should return to this point unless you've already flown more than a quarter of the way over the bay. You don't need to inform anyone beforehand. I'd like to make it clear that your reputation won't be damaged by your decision to turn back. If,

however, you're unfortunate enough to crash..."

If an eagle was going to crash because it lacked the stamina needed to keep flying, there'd almost always be warning signs, but exceptions could occur. There were unavoidable types of crashes, such as when an eagle had a heart attack and then suddenly died midair. That was so rare, though, that I'd never heard of such an accident occurring even once in all the time I'd been at the Knight Academy.

"...remove your safety harness as quickly as possible, get off your eagle, remove your clothes and armor, and take a deep breath. If you tread water in the sea, someone might come for you."

With my warning over, I took a step back. Carol stepped forward in my place.

"I'm your vice captain, Carol Flue Shaltl. My task will be to oversee the journey from the rear. If I can clearly see that your kingeagle isn't going to make it, I'll signal to you with my hand. Once you receive the signal, I'd like you to turn back immediately. As your captain has already explained, an eagle that's showing visible signs of fatigue won't be able to withstand the journey, and your chances of crash-landing will be high. I want you all to return home alive, so I implore you—do *not* disobey an order to turn back."

Carol spoke the words loud and clear, then stepped back when she was done.

"That said," I jumped in, following from Carol's speech. "As some of you know, I inspected all of our kingeagles on the day of our departure and identified those showing signs of weakness. Several participants with unfit kingeagles were asked to leave the unit. The kingeagles still here are those I've deemed healthy, so it's unlikely that any of you won't be able to make the journey. I don't want anyone to worry unnecessarily, but even so... No, I think we've scared you enough already. Let's head out."



In the end, Stardust touched down on the opposite side of the bay with a few great wingbeats, as if there'd never been cause for concern. We'd made it to Kilhina.

I quickly removed my safety harness and hopped off to the ground.

Kingeagles were landing one after another behind me. It looked like we'd all made it with no real problems. It was all over surprisingly quickly.

Once each and every one of our handpicked students had landed, removed their harness, and gotten off, they quickly arranged themselves and lined up. They'd remembered everything they'd been taught at the Knight Academy.

"Line up! Roll call!"

With that brief warning, I conducted the roll call.

I counted twenty-six students, in addition to Carol and myself, confirming that everyone had made it.

They'd been selected from a pool of the academy's best students, so this wasn't a gathering of mediocre individuals. That said, even subpar riders could've made it over the bay safely as long as their eagles were in good health.

"We'll take a short break, then head to Meshal Village as scheduled. At ease."

The students all slumped to the ground on the spot and relaxed once I'd finished speaking. It was probably mental exhaustion, rather than physical, that had gotten to them. It wasn't as tiring for me because this was my second time, but the risk of dying must've made everyone else tense.

"Nice work," Carol told me.

She was standing beside me holding Mountain Haze's reins.

"It was all down to the eagles being in good shape. I'm glad you didn't have to intervene."

Carol's job had been to order people to turn back, but fortunately, that hadn't been necessary.

"No, I mean we landed right next to Meshal," she said.

"Oh, that."

People had been traveling between Meshal and Colepta for years, which meant methods for determining the correct compass heading to follow had been well-established for some time. I'd tried it previously while returning from this spot a month ago, and I'd been impressed when I arrived in Colepta.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said. “Anyone could’ve done it.”

“I’ve been told that even experienced riders have to search for towns after reaching the area.”

They do?

It was true that just a few degrees of error on the compass would’ve taken us tens of kilometers away over a distance this great, so she might’ve been right. Still, it wasn’t like traveling on foot—a kingeagle literally had a bird’s eye view. We could’ve easily found the town even if we’d deviated, so going off-course wouldn’t have been a problem.

“I got lucky. More importantly, you look cold. Are you all right?”

Flying now was a lot better than in the coldest part of winter, but it was still fairly frigid. We felt the cold keenly. We’d been enduring it for about three hours, leaving us chilled to the bone.

“I’m fine,” Carol said.

“You don’t look fine. Your lips are blue.”

“I’m not gonna pass out.”

She didn’t look well, but if I were to fuss over her too much in front of our subordinates, they could lose respect for her. I decided it was best to leave her be.

“All right. Luckily, it’s not far to Meshal. We’ll find an inn once we arrive.”



Meshal looked like an ordinary village where half the population were fishermen and the other half farmers, but it actually made much of its money as a stop-off point for travelers, just like Colepta.

The village’s wealth was clear from the high-quality metal farming tools that lay beneath the eaves of farmer’s homes, the number of well-built houses, and the clothing worn by the villagers. Compared to the sight of a genuinely remote village deep in the mountains, this place seemed resplendent.

“Huh...?”

We'd arrived at the village's only large inn, only to find it closed. The curtains were all drawn, and the lack of chimney smoke suggested a lack of hot water. Unoccupied homes had a certain feel to them—like they'd ceased to breathe—and this place felt the same.

What's going on here?

The place had been operating as normal when I'd visited just three weeks ago. I'd even warned them in advance that I'd be arriving around this time with a large party. We were late by one day, but such delays weren't unusual. I'd even paid half the inn fee already.

I tried opening the door, but as expected, I merely heard the clattering of the lock. As I'd expected, the inn was closed.

"What's wrong?" Carol asked.

"I don't know. Maybe the innkeeper collapsed and it was shut down..."

It wasn't a huge inn, but it had at least ten rooms—too many to be managed by a single innkeeper. If he'd collapsed, there should've been other staff who could keep it running; yet it was left locked.

"Pardon me, pardon me."

I heard the voice calling out and noticed someone making their way toward us through the flock of kingeagles. A familiar face eventually emerged from the crowd.

"Ah. Didn't you work in the stables?"

"That's right."

This man was the inn's full-time stable keeper (which, in this case, meant he looked after eagles more often than horses). I remembered leaving Stardust in his care during my last visit.

"Sorry, but could you tell me what's going on? Has the owner died?"

"Well... You're not so far off, sir."

"What happened?"

"The master used all that money you gave him to take his whole family to

Shiyalta.”

What...?

“He was a nervous sort. People started leaving the village one after another when we got word of the war, and it must’ve been too much for him. A week ago, he gave me the inn key then left. I never saw him again.”

Wow, I can’t believe he took the money and ran.

Since I’d already paid half the fee, I had every right to stay at this inn. If this man had the key, then he could at least let us use the beds, even if we missed out on other services normally offered. I’d still call that fair.

“Then we can stay in the building, can’t we? I hope he at least left the bed linens behind...”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

Good to know he didn’t sell off the linens. Don’t tell me he’s planning on coming back and opening up shop again if the war goes well? If he does, I think I’ll have a thing or two to say to him.

“Are the staff all gone?” I asked.

“Staff? Of course, they’re all on leave.”

“That’s not what I meant. Are they still here in this village?”

“Oh, most of them are still around.”

We should be all right in that case. I don’t know what we would’ve done if everyone had vacated all the nearby settlements already.

“Do you think you could gather up everyone willing to work today and tomorrow?” I asked, handing the man a bag of silver coins. “That’s two thousand ruga in Shiyaltan silvers. I’m paying half now, and I’ll give you the rest when I leave.”

“Oh, but this is enough.”

“It’s also to cover food for the kingeagles and my party. I’ll need someone to take care of our eagles too. Given how many we’ve got, you won’t be able to do a good job alone. Use the money to hire some local children who’ve got the

time.”

“All right. I’ll round them up, sir.”

“I want our eagles to rest well today and tomorrow. And another thing...”

I took out a gold coin—worth one thousand ruga—and handed it to him.

“That’s your pay.”

The man looked at the coin like it was a gleaming treasure. “It’s all for me?”

“In exchange, make sure those silvers don’t find their way into your pocket. Even if there’s some left over, you should split it among the other workers.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do just that.”

“I’ll leave it to you. Now, if we could have the key.”

“Here.” He handed it over.

Once everyone had been assigned a room, they all went to rest. Likewise, Carol and I went to our room.

“You’re sure that was a good idea?” Carol asked before we’d even unpacked.

“What?”

“I don’t mean to sound stingy, but did you really have to give him a gold coin?”

Ah, that’s what she means. That’s a funny thing for her to get hung up on.

“You think it was too much?”

“I’m not criticizing you, but... The others won’t be getting that much, will they? Though I’m not sure how many people you’re expecting him to gather.”

“You think I should’ve paid him the same as everyone else? About five copper coins?”

A copper coin was worth fifty ruga, so the gold coin I’d given the stablehand was twenty times that amount.

Since we wanted him to look after us for two days, it was only half that amount per day, but it was still a lot for a peasant in a remote village. It was like

I'd given him a full month's wages all at once.

"It's not about the amount. It's that you gave him much more than everyone else."

"Because he'll have to work twice as hard as everyone else. He wouldn't do that if I'd only given him a little extra."

"Hm..."

I sensed she disagreed.

"Though that's only half the reason," I continued.

"Oh? What's the rest?"

"How much money did I leave in his care? Two thousand ruga. There'd be no point giving a measly fifty ruga to someone holding that much money. I don't know him well enough to judge him, but most people would underpay the employees so they could pocket the rest. Then the employees wouldn't treat our eagles right, and the eagles wouldn't get the rest they need. We'd be worse off."

"You think he'd do that?"

"Well, it's possible he's an honest guy."

There were some people who'd work hard no matter how low their pay.

"But you think most aren't?"

"Maybe. The thing is, if someone isn't paid enough for the level of responsibility they're given, they'll often try to make up for it by stealing the funds they're managing."

Then again, some people—like the witches—were so rotten that they'd steal money through corruption no matter how well they got paid.

"Ah... Okay, I get it." Carol sounded impressed.

She's agreeing?

"You're not your usual difficult self today."

I thought she was going to turn it into an argument.

“I’m just thinking that my mother might be right about something she said.”

“What? What did she say?”

I hope she’s not giving Carol any weird ideas.

“She was telling me I’d learn a lot from watching you and seeing how you do things.”

“What? Why would you want to learn anything from me?”

If she lets a guy like me influence her, she’s not going to be very princess-like.



Carol had rushed off somewhere, leaving me to rest in the room alone.

As leader, I had a surprising number of duties—much like I did when I was managing Ho Company—but once all those duties were taken care of, it was possible to rest while subordinates did all the work. It had been Caph at Ho Company, and here it was Carol. In both cases I was blessed with good help.

The door opened while I was lying in bed.

“Hey.”

It was Carol, so I sat up.

“What is it?”

“There’s some alcohol in the supplies we brought. Should I let everyone drink it?”

Ah, the alcohol. I didn’t think of that.

They’d just experienced a flight that could’ve killed them, so I wouldn’t stop them from letting loose for a while. It would help settle their nerves.

“I don’t mind, but you’d better warn them not to embarrass themselves.”

“Got it. Also...”

That was when I noticed that the stablehand from earlier was standing behind Carol.

“I think he wants to talk,” Carol said.

Sure looks that way. He wouldn't come to my room if he didn't.

When Carol drew back, the man stepped forward. "Yes, there's a matter I'd like to discuss..."

"What is it?"

He didn't run out of money while buying eagle food, did he?

"We've placed your eagle and Lady Carol's in the stables, but the rest will have to be tethered outside."

"Yes, I knew that."

Last time I'd been here, I'd worried that our eagles might get wet in the cold rain. But the night was so clear that all the stars were visible. Unless I'd been mistaken, rain seemed unlikely.

"The problem is, there's a bear that often visits."

A bear?

The ones in this region were mostly brown bears, and, like true believers in Bergmann's rule, they tended to be big. They tended to be underweight in the spring because they'd hibernated through winter. On the other hand, that meant they woke up hungry.

Bears often developed a habit of visiting human settlements. They might hunt humans or chance across any trash that humans had discarded. Sometimes, they learned that meat could be found hanging up around run-down shacks. In any case, they were a nuisance.

"Go on," I said.

"We can, of course, guard any eagles in the stables as normal, but with so many of them tethered up outside, it's..." He trailed off, hesitant to say it.

"You're telling me you can't guarantee the safety of our eagles?"

"Yes, that's correct. Though your eagles won't simply lie down and wait to be eaten—they might scare off the bear with their talons. We also have a hunter in the village. I've asked him to watch the eagles overnight, and his arrows should drive off the bear."

“I see.”

A few arrows were likely to be enough to drive away a scrawny bear. The problem was that we had twenty-six eagles tethered up. Keeping watch over all of them the whole night wouldn't be an easy task. If we untethered them, they could avoid the bear by taking flight, but that wasn't an option. Any eagles that didn't come back would be as good as dead.

“I have a suggestion I'd like to make,” he said.

“What is it?”

“If you could lend us some of your spears, the villagers could use them to guard your eagles. I'm ashamed to say it, but the only weapons we have are axes and hatchets.”

Ah, that's what he really came here to say.

An axe or hatchet used for cutting through wood or thickets wasn't going to inspire much confidence against a bear. A spear with some good range would be the best-suited weapon. Even peasants with no combat training could jab a spear at a bear from a distance, whereas approaching such a beast with an axe would take some serious courage.

But a spear was an important possession for any knight—almost like a trusted friend. Though I didn't want to sound prejudiced, they weren't for lending to peasants.

“We can't do that. We'll guard our own eagles in shifts.”

Though he'd made his suggestion out of ignorance, someone a little more uptight than I was might've felt obliged to cut him down for his lack of respect. It wasn't right to ask a knight for his spear, even if it was to protect his eagle.

“Wouldn't that be too much to ask of you?” the man replied.

“No, it's fine. I'll stand guard too.”

“You?”

“I wouldn't mind doing some bear-hunting myself.”

Both the man and Carol stared at me in disbelief.



Later that night, I was sitting on a chair, in the center of a camp lit by flaming braziers. I could hear the bonfire before me crackling loudly because of the moisture in the firewood.

The eagles around me all had their eyes covered. They were wearing eagle hoods—a covering often used when leaving an eagle somewhere besides a bird cage during the day. Once blindfolded, some instinct made the birds become docile. It was like giving them a sedative.

A well-trained bird like Stardust didn't normally need a hood, but he'd gotten one along with Mountain Haze regardless. It was necessary because we had many fires burning tonight, and the light would distract an eagle, preventing them from sleeping well.

I was sitting in the center of the unit members on guard duty. I was wearing warm clothing and passing the time in a state of half-sleep, half-wakefulness.

Carol was beside me. For some reason, she'd been eager to help after learning that I'd be on night watch. She should've just stayed in the room, because—based on how her eyes were closed below her furrowed brow—she seemed to be struggling to sleep here. Anyone who didn't understand the situation would think she'd shut her eyes in an attempt to contain her anger.

I told her the same thing I'd said several times before. "Go back to the room if you're having a hard time."

"No... I'd be setting a bad example," she immediately replied without opening her eyes.

So she really is awake. She doesn't sound very energetic. Why does she have to be so stubborn?

There was a world of difference between someone struggling to sleep because of alertness caused by insomnia, and someone struggling to sleep despite their body's willingness because the unfamiliar surroundings put their nerves on edge. Carol's state was probably the latter—her pampered upbringing made it hard for her to sleep despite being physically exhausted. She'd probably doze off in an instant if she were to lie in bed.

On the other hand, relaxing and falling into a deep sleep right here, as if she *were* in a bed, wouldn't look good at all. I would've ordered her to go back to the room if she had.

Her only option was to sleep sitting like a student trying to sneak in a nap unnoticed in class. Naturally, I'd never once seen Carol sleeping through a lecture.

"Okay, do what you want."

As long as it didn't ruin her health, she could be as stubborn as she wanted. Her presence here meant that the sentries were staying alert.

I took out a round loaf of bread that I'd brought, cut into it deeply with a knife, put a bit of butter and some cheese into the opening, ran a skewer through it, and held it to the fire. I had to be sure to constantly turn it so that it wouldn't burn.

I wasn't particularly hungry, but it was best to eat a little extra when dealing with an unexpected task like this one that might drain my strength. My health wouldn't fail me so long as I got enough nourishment, though I might grow fat in the process.

Once the bread was starting to brown a little, I drew it away. I used my knife once more, this time cutting the sandwich into two pieces. Finally, I slid the knife across the bread to wipe it clean and put it back into its sheath.

I passed Carol half. "Here. Eat up."

"Huh?" Carol looked surprised to be given half of my sandwich.

"Eat. Even if you're not hungry. Otherwise you'll make yourself ill."

"Ah... You're right. Thanks."

Carol took the bread and bit into it. I did the same and found that the butter was salted. It had melted and soaked into the bread, which gave it a rich, salty flavor. With melted cheese to accompany it, it tasted great.

"This is good..." Carol said. Apparently, she liked it.

"Yeah?"

She must've been hungry, because she polished hers off in no time at all.

After I'd finished my last bite, I realized that I hadn't checked the time in a while.

I took a silver pocket watch—expertly made by Lilly—from my pocket and noticed that it was about time to change shifts.

"It's time to rotate. Rooms six and seven are on duty next. You can go wake them up. I'll go tell all the students currently on guard that they can go back to their rooms."

"All right."

I got up from my chair. My awareness came back to me sharply for a time, just like waking from a nap in a class. Meanwhile, Carol's autonomic nervous system must've been thrown off, because she looked a little unsteady.

"You can go back to the room and sleep while you're at it," I told her.

"Moron," she shot back with a slight scowl.

"Dawn's breaking..."

For the first time ever, I'd spent a night without sleep or anything to do. Naturally, I'd pulled all-nighters many times in the past, but I'd always been busy with some task, talking to someone, or playing a game.

A sentry's job wasn't easy.

Seeing the black of night very, very slowly turn to the light of day was emotionally moving. But at the same time I felt boredom and sleepiness, along with a few fruitless feelings.

"We can't have both leaders disappear at once. You go to sleep first."

Carol looked at me like she hadn't caught what I'd just said, or as if she hadn't understood what the words meant. Fatigue must've gotten the better of her.

She thought for a few moments, then said, "All right. If you don't mind..."

For a moment, I'd been worried she'd turn it into a contest between us, but she must've been aware enough of her physical condition to realize she

couldn't go on much longer. She'd decided to comply.

I knew her all too well.

"Make sure you do," I said without looking at her.

That was when I noticed one of the unit members moving in an unnatural way. Seeing a student's whole body jerk and their eyes open, as they'd fallen asleep on their feet, had become a common sight during the night. But this was different—it was as though his knees had given way in terror. He was cowering on the ground.

"It's...It's here!" someone yelled in a loud voice.

"So we meet at last," I said while dragging myself to my feet. "Carol, take command. I think it's all going to go according to the plan we've discussed, though."

Carol's sleepy expression had been replaced by something much more tense. She nodded, then took off.

The plan we'd discussed meant surrounding the bear with spears in order to protect the eagles.

I grabbed my gear and ran over to find a huge brown bear, easily three meters in length. Unit members, mostly wielding short spears, had surrounded it, forming a wall with their spear points. The bear was big enough that I instinctively felt I was faced with an overwhelmingly strong opponent, and every hair on my body stood on end.

The bear wasn't particularly aggressive, though. Rather than paying attention to the small humans standing in its path, it was focused on the eagles that lay beyond them.

According to the head of the stables, the bear had attacked a certain fisherman's home the first time it'd come to the village. He'd tied up the fish he'd caught in the nearby river under his eaves to dry. The bear had enjoyed those so much that it began a habit of visiting human settlements in search of more. The inn had still been operating back then, and any unfinished leftovers from the guests would be buried behind the building. The bear had caught the scent of the scraps and started digging up the ground in search of food.

There were other homes besides those where the bear had found nice things, and now it would make the rounds daily before going back to the forest. Even though the inn had shut down, the bear still visited it as part of its patrol, not knowing when to give up.

At any rate, the bear wasn't here because it liked to attack people. It kept rearing up and crouching down, trying to get a better look at the eagles behind the group blocking its path. It looked conflicted, unsure whether the large amount of bird meat would be worth fighting for.

I wasn't going to wait for it to make up its mind. I unwrapped an important item that was with my belongings. It was a tool made up of a steel tube that had been carefully shaped, as well as some wood and metal fittings. It was a device designed to launch metal balls through the tube. In short, it was a gun—the newest model from Albio, in fact.

I intended to hand it over to the Kilhina Kingdom as a small gift that I'd had imported from the Albio Republic.

It felt wet to the touch because the whole thing was coated with a low-viscosity oil, but not quite sticky. It had a smooth bore with no rifling, and a flintlock mechanism for the ignition.

Unlike a freshly sharpened sword, a gun wouldn't decline in quality after a little bit of use. In fact, it would've been awful if I were to learn that the thing wouldn't fire only after I'd given it to someone as a gift, so I'd previously fired five shots to test it.

I opened the cover and checked to make sure there was gunpowder in the gun's flash pan. If I were to pull the gun's trigger, it would cause a piece of flint to hit hard against the pan cover, which doubled as the striking steel. A shower of sparks would then be sent flying into the gunpowder held in the pan, thereby igniting it. The gunpowder—whose combustion would actually propel the bullet—was stuffed into the bottom of the barrel formed by the tube. The gunpowder in the pan served as priming powder, and igniting it would in turn burn the gunpowder in the barrel because a small hole near the rear of the barrel placed it in communication with the pan. The pan was perfectly sealed when the cover was closed. It wasn't fully waterproof, of course, but the

gunpowder wouldn't simply spill out as the gun was carried around. That meant the gun could be left ready to fire the first shot—the user just had to aim and pull the trigger.

“Move aside. I'm coming through.”

I made my way through the unit members to the front of the line.

“Huh?”

“Captain?”

I heard several students reacting to my arrival.

When I reached the front, I could see the bear clearly. It was about six meters away from me.

I'd practiced firing about twenty shots from another gun, so I had the hang of this already. I likely would've struggled if I were over ten meters away, but I wasn't going to miss such a big target from this distance.

I went down on one knee, rested the stock against my shoulder, and I took aim.

My unusual movements must've caught the bear's attention, because it looked right at me.

When I pulled the trigger, I heard a click as a spring was released, followed by a whooshing sound close to my ear—similar to a firework launching. Black powder burned up into the air. *Bam!* There was a thunderous roar, and I felt the recoil against my shoulder.

Through the smoke that had escaped from the barrel, I saw the lead ball embed itself in the bear's abdomen. The moment it hit, a jolt ran through the bear's entire body like it'd been dealt a heavy blow.

It glared at me for a few seconds with eyes full of hate, then dashed off into the forest at full speed.

The unfamiliar foreign weapon, in addition to the deafening roar of it firing, had left the unit members around me looking like startled animals.

“Where's the hunter?! Is the hunter here?!” I called out.

“I’m here! I’m here!” A man wearing an animal hide replied twice for some reason.

I’d briefly met the hunter before the night watch had started.

“I don’t know whether it was fatal, but it’s badly wounded. Can you send your dog after it?” I asked, looking in the direction that the bear had run off. A trail of scarlet droplets led into the forest.

“I think we can handle this,” the hunter replied.

A hunting dog’s job was to find wild game, and when that game was injured by the hunter, to track it down. A large creature like a bear would often survive a gunshot wound, but a dog could track it and hound it to prevent it from resting, exacerbating its blood loss. An injury that might’ve healed with rest could therefore be enough to take the animal’s life.

The long-haired dog standing by the hunter and wagging its tail vigorously would do just that. I might’ve petted it if only I’d had the time.

“Okay. Go. You can have the pelt,” I told the hunter.



The hunter returned about two hours later, a large cart of sorts—loaded with meat and fur—in tow.

He must’ve somehow managed to take the cart into the forest with them and skinned the bear while he was there.

Carol and the unit members crowded round to see.

Hunters belonging to the nobility would often hunt deer, not bears. They’d probably never seen such a beast killed before.

“Hm, that’s a fine pelt,” I said.

“Y-Yes, it is...” The hunter looked a little scared as he replied. He must’ve worried that I’d decide to keep it.

“Relax. I’ll let you have it like I promised. But I’ll be taking the rest.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Now where’s the gallbladder?”

The hunter's face twitched at the question, his expression looking like a deer in headlights. "It's h-h-here."

From a bag of his own belongings, the hunter pulled out something fleshy that hung from a fine string.

You would've saved that for yourself if I hadn't said anything, wouldn't you?

Seeing a bear's gallbladder for the first time, it struck me as grotesque. It was a thin, translucent white membrane that encapsulated a liquid that was sloshing around inside. The opening to the bag-shaped organ had been tied shut to prevent the liquid inside from spilling out. The whole thing would harden as it dried, turning into a medicine known as bear's gall.

It had long been a delicacy among the Shanti, and perhaps other peoples too, making it highly valuable. I'd tried it once when I was very young and knew it had a unique and incredibly bitter taste. But as they say, good medicine tastes bitter.

The hunter held it as it swung from the string he'd used to tie it. He'd clearly planned to hang it up to dry like that in his own home.

"I'll take that." I said. "Maybe you can tell me the best way to dry it out."

"Um... Once it's mostly dry, lie it flat between two pieces of wood with holes in them... Though that could rupture it, and that'd be a terrible waste. Assuming you're not preparing it for sale, it might be best to just hang it up like that."

I see.

It looked like a water flask right now, but once it had half-dried, the contents would cease to be liquid, and the whole thing could be gradually pressed flat as it dried.

"Got it. Thanks for this. It's a nice souvenir."

"Yes..."

The hunter remained reluctant to part with it. His eyes seemed to say, *"That nice 'souvenir' of yours would've put food on my table."* Still, he left with his pelt.

I felt a little sorry for him, but I'd been the one who'd dealt the fatal wound.

The pelt alone would fetch a high price, so I wanted him to be satisfied with that.

Oh, he'll be fine.

"Hey," Carol said. I turned and saw her glaring at me. She pointed at the bear gall hanging from the string I was holding. I could tell she was disgusted. "What did you want that thing for?"

"It's a war trophy. Why shouldn't I keep it?"

"Uh...? You call *that* a trophy? Wouldn't you normally want a claw or paw or something?"

"You've never seen one, have you? It's a gallbladder."

"I can see it's an organ, but... What's it good for?"

Has she really never taken bear's gall?

I remembered that when I'd tried it, Rook had told me, "This stuff's really expensive, so consider yourself lucky." I'd assumed it might've been a folk remedy that the royals never used, but that couldn't be true because I'd actually seen a flattened bear gallbladder for sale in a pharmacy in Sibiak for several gold coins.

"You've never tried a bear's gallbladder?"

"I've never even *heard* of it. Do you boil it whole?"

Boil it...? That'd be a horrible waste.

"Once it's dried out, it turns sweet like candy. Bears' gall is special. It's a smooth sort of sweetness. These are usually used to make desserts for the upper classes. I'm surprised you've never heard of it. I'll let you try it later."

This would be a fun trick.

"Sweet...? That meaty looking thing?"

"Yeah, there's a sweet organ inside bears. Isn't that weird?"

"Hmm..."

She appeared genuinely curious.

“I’m going to leave this somewhere to dry. Give the bear meat and offal to the kingeagles; just make sure to separate the stomach and intestines from the rest.”

It was best to remove the digestive system because it contained acid, alkali, bacteria, and feces.

“Huh? Me?” Carol looked in horror at the splatterfest that was lying on the cart.

I could’ve made it an order, but scooping up chunks of bloody flesh to give to the eagles was a lot to ask of a girl who had a princess’s upbringing. I certainly wasn’t going to make her do it after she’d gone the whole night without sleep.

“Ah, you can ask the stablehand to do it. I’m sure he’ll know not to give them the stomach or intestines, but you should mention it just to be safe.”

“Oh... Okay.”

“Take a break once that’s over.”

Carol and I would be taking turns to rest.



Some of the unit members had gathered as a group to chat, so they were blocking my path. It was a mixture of students who’d actually faced the bear with spears in hand and students who’d been sleeping at the time. They were talking excitedly about the confrontation.

It must’ve been quite the spectacle, but I felt bad for the students who’d had no role to play despite staying up.

“What are you doing?” I asked them.

“We’re sharing tales of your heroism, Captain,” a unit member—one who was younger than me—replied.

The students we’d chosen were distributed across the year groups evenly, so quite a few of them were younger than me. They weren’t a majority, but they weren’t rare either.

“All I did was shoot it with a gun.”

The response I'd received seemed bizarre to me. I was proud of myself for hitting it, but I didn't feel particularly gallant while wielding a gun. I didn't feel it was unfair or cowardly to use one, but deep down, I felt that using a weapon like that meant trading heroism for efficiency.

"Yes, that. Is it the Kulati weapon we've heard about? Perhaps you could teach us."

Well, isn't this one an eager student?

"I'm planning on saving the teaching until we reach our destination. I'm not explaining it here."

The young scholar was visibly disappointed by that response. "Ah, very well."

"Actually...if you've got nothing to do, it might be a good idea to imagine this situation. Look."

I held up the gun in my hand so they could all see it.

"Anyone can use this weapon with ease. I've only practiced with it for a single day, just last week. I'm no genius—anyone can learn to use it just as quickly as I did. Imagine an enemy with weapons like this forming a line of, say, a thousand soldiers. Imagine they fire a volley of bullets, like the one I fired at the bear, at a unit under your command. Think about what might happen to you in that situation. By the way, the weakness of these things is that they can only fire one shot at a time. Getting another bullet ready to fire is a slow process. If you want something to do, think about how you'd fight against an enemy unit that's using this weapon."

After leaving them with that problem, I quickly left before they could ask me anything more. I wanted to get back to my bedroom and wash the gallbladder in water.

Once I'd washed the squishy bladder, I could see that the liquid inside was green, completely different from blood. It felt unlikely that the bladder's tough membrane would split open.

It felt a little like buying a bulky souvenir right at the start of a trip, but I secretly couldn't wait to see how it turned out.



“There’s no one around?” Carol asked.

We’d landed in Nikka Village where we’d set up our camp. It looked like an ordinary farming village from the outside, but sure enough, it was deserted. Now it looked like a ghost town filled with buildings that lacked any signs of life. Actually, no, it *was* a ghost town.

“We’re in the recommended evacuation zone,” I said.

The “recommended evacuation zone” system had only been established a short while ago. Essentially, an area that was expected to be affected by the war (more specifically, the area that would be immediately lost to invaders following the loss of the war) was designated as an evacuation zone in advance.

Necessary though it was, the existence of such a system was enough to unsettle people, so it didn’t exist in Shiyalta. The Kilhina Kingdom had first introduced it this year and recommended the evacuation of a particular region soon after.

Out of consideration for the chieftain family that ruled over the land, evacuation was only “recommended.” The advice was only meant for the civilian residents. Since we were well within the evacuation zone, the civilian homes had been deserted.

That was probably for the best. It wasn’t far from Verdun Fortress where one of the main battles was expected to take place, though it was a little removed from the route between the fortress and major towns.

We’d chosen this village for that reason, but its remoteness would only create a short delay between the outbreak of war and the arrival of enemies. It certainly wasn’t a place people could flee to with their possessions once the war had started. Evacuating had been the right choice.

“Looks like Liao and Myalo’s company hasn’t arrived yet,” Carol noted.

If everything had gone according to schedule, they would’ve arrived here a day before us... But that was merely a schedule. Although a week’s delay might cause a problem, a day or two was within the acceptable margin of error.

“Unlike us, it’s a really long trip for them. We’ll wait for two days, then we’ll search for them if they still haven’t arrived.”

“All right.”

“More importantly, we need an inn and food for tonight. There won’t be any villagers around to take care of us this time.”

There wouldn’t be anyone we could pay to make our meals. We’d have to handle all of our own cooking and cleaning.

“Yeah. Okay... I’ll think about food first. Which house did you use to store all the food you bought?”

“That one.”

I’d rented a house from a resident who’d been in the process of evacuating and stored all of the food inside before locking the door. The lock wouldn’t be enough to stop someone determined with an axe though, so there was a chance that someone had stolen the food since then.

We went to the house in question. After removing the padlock on the wooden front door, it opened with no trouble at all. When I took a look inside, I found everything was just as I’d left it—dried meat, grains, and other supplies left over from the winter were piled up on the floor.

“All right, this’ll be enough,” Carol said.

“Yeah. We can relax for now. There are plenty of rooms for us too.”

“Can we really use people’s homes without asking?”

“I got permission. I gave a little cash to all of the residents, so don’t worry,” I said.

“You know Yuri, you always spend time on minor details like that.” Carol sounded a little surprised for some reason.

“What? As I should—we’re using their homes.”

“I didn’t mean it as criticism. I’m impressed. When you deal with witches, all you do is argue.”

“Don’t even compare the residents to that trash. These are poor people who

toil to make a living every single day, and now the war's driven them out of their village. I don't normally get involved in charity, but I don't mind sparing some cash with an appropriate excuse."

I knew not everyone from the village was a saint, but they were definitely the victims in this case. I hated to see it.

Carol seemed sheepish after being caught off guard by my rational response. "Y-Yeah. You're right."

"Anyway, we need to assign rooms. I'm sure we'll all have a roof to sleep under, but we'll need to count how many bed linens there are."

"Okay."

"All of us higher-ups can stay in the mayor's manor."

"Really?" Carol looked unsure.

"It has a hall big enough for small village gatherings. It'll be a good place for meetings and receiving reports."

"Ah, I see."

"There's a bath too. We can take turns using it."

Carol didn't express any joy at that news, but she didn't have to—it was clear to see on her face.



Myalo and Liao's company arrived that evening.

"Hey."

I greeted Liao, seated on his plainrunner and at the front of the group.

"We just got here," Liao said after climbing down. He sounded fairly tired.

"Good work," I told him.

"We happened to see your eagles pass us overhead. We hurried after you."

"Ah."

I see.

Our routes overlapped in a few places, so it wasn't *totally* unexpected that they'd see us, but it was still quite lucky.

"I know you're tired, but could you give us a brief report?"

"Yeah. Myalo will handle that. She'll be here in a moment."

No sooner than he'd finished speaking, Myalo emerged from the rear of the company and passed by the column of newly arrived students.

I was relieved to see that she didn't look too tired. That had to be because I'd lent her a Ho family plainrunner. Myalo's bird was more comfortable to ride than most because it had been carefully raised by a trainer who'd been an apprentice to Rook.

"Myalo, good work."

"Thank you." She gave me a warm smile.

"Could we hear your report?"

"Well, we didn't have any major problems, really. We didn't lose anything other than what we consumed ourselves. We simply fell behind schedule because we encountered impassable roads in three locations, and we had to take lengthy detours as a result."

A little trouble along the way was to be expected. It sounded like a successful journey to me.

"All right. I'm glad. Likewise, we had no losses, even during the bay crossing. Though we did have to leave four people behind because their eagles weren't fit."

"I see."

"All right... Now could you give the order to disperse so that everyone can get some rest?"

"Okay," Liao agreed before turning around and giving the orders loudly. "You've all performed well throughout the journey! Now our transportation mission is complete! Once you've carried the cargo to the center of the village square, everyone except the horse handlers can disperse! Get some rest here in the village!"

I was surprised that they had dedicated horse handlers, but that had probably been a necessity. Now that I thought about it, they had as many horses as wagons, so they'd obviously need to put time into caring for them.

Liao's members saluted in response to his orders, then proceeded toward the village square.



Together with the other leaders of our unit, I'd entered the mayor's home to hold a meeting.

"So that's how we'll assign the rooms. Any objections?"

We had a simple map of the village drawn on paper. The names of unit members were written on the houses they'd been assigned.

"Got to say, I'm a little worried about cooking," Liao said. "I know we're well supplied, but all the bread we've been eating on the way here was bought ready-made. Soon we'll have to start kneading and baking it ourselves."

"Can't we just knead it from wheat flour?"

We had heaps of flour, but we couldn't exactly eat it as it was.

I'd often eaten bread Suzuya had made at home when I was very young, and I'd seen her make it, but she'd never taught me the process. Perhaps she hadn't seen a need to teach her eldest son to cook. Still, I wished I'd researched it before leaving.

"From what the dorm mother told me, it'll turn into plate bread if you just knead and bake it," Myalo said.

"Ah... That stuff."

Plate bread was similar in shape to naan. Sometimes it was convenient to use it like a plate. Cheese, fish, or meat was often placed on it while it was baking, though it was hard to say whether it was best classified as a pizza, or as a gratin served on bread.

Myalo must've foreseen this problem when she'd asked about it.

"To get soft, fluffy bread, you can add an extra ingredient made from the

leftovers of brewing alcohol. An easier way is to save a little bit of the dough when you're making a batch and add that to the next one."

Ah, so that's the trick. Save a little bit of bread that's been through fermentation so the microbes from that can be transferred to the next batch. Yeah, that'd be the easiest solution. That said, I remember hearing something about bulk fermentation and final fermentation. I'm not so sure total beginners like us can handle this. Well, if it comes down to it, we can just eat unleavened bread. It shouldn't taste too bad with a bit of salt and butter on it.

"So we need to somehow get hold of a little bread dough that's ready for baking," I said.

"I'm sure we can manage that. We can use an eagle to fetch some," Liao said.

We couldn't just ask someone to run out and buy some bread for us while we were right in the middle of the evacuation zone, but the difficulty disappeared if we used kingeagles. And unlike a large pile of meat, a little bread dough would be no problem for an eagle to carry.

"Okay, I'll pick some up while I'm visiting Reforme," I said. "It can wait until the day after tomorrow, right?"

"Huh? You're going to Reforme?" Carol asked in surprise.

"I've already greeted the royal family on my previous visit, so that's not why I'm going. I need to get a rough idea of where and when the fighting is likely to begin."

That sort of information became outdated rapidly; I knew better than to rely on information I'd gathered a month ago.

"It wouldn't be very funny if the war ended while we were messing around trying to make bread, would it?" I added.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Carol asked.

"No, you can take care of things here."

"Huh?"

Carol clearly hadn't been expecting that. She wasn't used to being left behind when it came to such matters.

“They’ll fuss over us too much if you’re there. I’m worried they’ll throw a big welcoming ceremony. It’d be a waste of their time, given there’s a war on.”

Carol sulked like a child, but Liao and Myalo nodded in agreement.

I looked over at Liao. “Liao, I want you with me...unless that’s a problem.”

Sadly, Myalo’s presence could cause problems because of her family background. If someone were to ask about my secretary—perhaps assuming she was some young hopeful from a big family in Ho Province—there’d be all kinds of misunderstandings when the truth came out. I could lie about her, of course, but that would just complicate things.

“All right. Let’s do that,” Liao replied curtly.

The leaders’ meeting had ended. I’d just left the mayor’s home when I heard a familiar voice.

“You’re headed to Reforme?”

“Yes. But don’t worry, I’m not taking Carol,” I replied.

I looked over and saw the royal sword standing beside the building, her back resting against the wall. The dark clothing she wore helped her blend into the building’s shadow.

“I was listening,” she said.

Eavesdropping was, of course, a royal sword’s specialty.

“You’re staying here, right?” I asked.

“That should be obvious.”

She was here to look after Carol, so she’d want to stay as close to her as possible.

“Actually, can you even ride a kingeagle?” I asked.

Though I’d known she’d be coming, I had no idea how she’d followed us. We hadn’t been in contact with each other, so I didn’t even know when she’d arrived. I hadn’t told anyone else about her either, since the other members might’ve been alarmed to know that a royal sword was watching us.

At any rate, I could only assume she was somehow handling her own food and lodging herself.

“I can,” she said. “But that’s not how I got here.”

“Why not?”

Seems like the easiest way to get here to me.

“We...can only use a special type of eagle. They’re used only for Her Majesty the Queen’s sake.”

The royal sword was clearly annoyed by my question. Maybe it wasn’t information she wanted to share, or maybe she didn’t want to talk to me any more than strictly necessary. It left me puzzled regardless.

As Carol’s escort, she had to be a fairly high-ranking individual. I couldn’t imagine what the special eagles she’d mentioned were, but maybe there weren’t more than a couple, so there weren’t enough for her to take one.

Eagles were suited for surprise attacks, reconnaissance, and travel, but perhaps not for traveling in secret. That, or...maybe she was just a bad rider.

“I see. Well, you don’t take orders from me, so go do whatever it is you do.”

“Keeping watch over you is part of what I do.”

“Huh?”

How can she? Unless she can clone herself, she’ll soon lose track of me.

Carol and I were two wholly independent people. There was no way her bodyguard could watch what both of us were doing at the same time. Besides, I doubted that Her Majesty had ordered the royal sword to watch me. If she’d been so suspicious of me, she never would’ve trusted me with Carol. It made no sense.

“Her Highness is wise, so I can trust her to act sensibly. You, however, might give orders that aren’t in Her Highness’s best interests.”

Ah, that’s her concern.

To her, I was a source of uncertainty. While I was worried that Carol might do something rash, her guard thought the exact opposite.

Rather than being a levelheaded assessment of my character based on her experiences, it was probably how royal swords tended to view everything. As someone devoted to the royal family, she wouldn't disagree with anything they did. You could say she was highly biased toward them. She had to be—if she wasn't, the royal family wouldn't be able to trust her.

“So Her Majesty trusts me to take care of Carol, but you don't trust me at all? You must think Her Majesty made the wrong decision in that case.”

“Anyone can make a mistake. Her Majesty is no exception.”

If she really was suspicious of me, it wasn't like she'd just come out and say it to my face. She probably just wanted to make sure that I'd remember my duty to take care of Carol.

“Sure. But unless you think Her Majesty's completely clueless, you should trust her judgment... More than you trust your own at least.”

“Hmph...”

The royal sword turned her back as though she'd grown tired of talking to me; our conversation was over.

I watched her walk away and disappear into the forest.



I rounded up all of the unit members early afternoon the next day.

“I know you'd all like to rest, but I'd like to give a lecture.”

I was in the center of the village square, standing in front of a bonfire that had been lit sometime earlier.

“Maybe you should think of it more like a study group than a lecture. We didn't come here to fight, but we're not here to mess around either. If we're here for anything, it's to learn. We're on a field trip.”

I took another look at the unit members and could see their enthusiasm. They were ready to listen. They hadn't been forced to be here. These were all exceptional volunteers that had been selected through a rigorous process. They were ideal students.

“This is the enemy’s latest weapon.”

I let the stock hit the ground with a thud as I propped the gun before them.

“New weapons like this one are making battle tactics and strategies very different from anything we’ve been taught in the Knight Academy’s lecture classes. I’m sorry to say that much of what we’ve been taught can be considered outdated. Still, that’s not to say that those classes were a waste of time.”

I looked at the unit members listening to me speak before I continued, “Although the weapons in use have changed, the fundamentals of the principles at play on the battlefield have not.”

“No matter how much the battlefield changes, the reasoning found in old war manuals will always hold—strike the enemy’s weak point, crush their morale, envelop them, cut off their retreat, hold the high ground. These basic principles will never cease to apply, even as weaponry changes. But all the same, new weaponry will transform the battlefield. When tools far superior to swords and spears appear, it’s senseless to continue fighting with swords and spears. It goes without saying that armies ignoring this reality will face crushing defeats. So what we need now is ingenuity. If we’re outmatched on the battlefield, then perhaps the enemy can be lured into the forest where those advantages no longer apply. Ideas like that are easy to think of. Such plans won’t always work, of course, but failed attempts also lead to progress. And through continued progress, we may find reliable ways to suppress enemies who wield superior weaponry.”

After saying all of this in one go, I paused for a moment.

“Now then... It was about thirty years ago when these weapons known as ‘guns’ began to spread through the world of the Kulati. I’m sure many of you are knowledgeable about these matters, but I’ll provide a brief explanation anyway. The current enemy invading Kilhina is a collection of nations that follow Yeesusism...or the Catholica sect of Yeesusism, to be more precise. These guns were first invented in a Kulati nation known as the Korlan Dragon Empire where people follow a religion known as Kokorlism. The nations of Yeesusism learned of the weapon and introduced it to their own armies later, but they

didn't have time to equip many of their soldiers with it in time for the thirteenth invasion of 2278. Despite being barely used in the crusade, the weapon displayed great versatility. As a result, it was employed in much greater numbers during the fourteenth invasion—a key reason for the great losses our side suffered. I expect it to be used even more in the current war.”

I held up the gun for everyone to see for a few moments, then lowered it to the ground again.

“I'd like you all to take turns firing the gun. It'll help you understand its strengths and weaknesses. But first, I'll explain the mechanism behind it.”

I reached for a small container with a narrow opening that was used to pour gunpowder into the gun's flash pan.

“The material in this container is known as gunpowder. You probably can't see it from a distance, but that's okay because you'll be able to handle it yourself when you try the gun. To sum up its properties, it's like sand that burns—but far more vigorously than dry wood or coal.”

I made a line of gunpowder on a piece of wood, placed it on a table, used a pair of tongs to pick up a piece of glowing charcoal from the fire, and placed it down on the wood.

There was a whooshing sound, accompanied by a flash of bright light and copious amounts of smoke as the fire spread across the dry gunpowder.

“Now you've seen how it burns, though it probably didn't look very impressive. It burns well, but why should you care? Well, gunpowder behaves quite differently when it's ignited inside a sealed container.”

I picked up a wooden rod I'd prepared for this purpose.

“All I'm going to do is put the powder into a hole in this rod, then put a stopper in it. That's all it takes to create a seal. Now see what happens when I throw it into the bonfire.”

I picked up the gun from the floor and moved it a safe distance away from the fire.

“You should all get back too. You'll get hurt,” I warned the students who were

too close to the fire.

I gave them a moment to move back.

“All troops, on the ground!” I yelled.

The order must’ve seemed odd to them, but they got down after only a little hesitation.

I threw the wooden rod into the bonfire.

Nothing happened at first because my little hand-made grenade didn’t have a fuse of any kind. For a while, the odd spectacle of a bunch of students crouching around a bonfire continued.

Then came the explosion.

Bam!

With that incredible sound, bits of wooden shrapnel flew out from the bonfire in all directions. Then came the cries of frightened birds from the nearby forest, and the sound of their wings as they flew off.

“On your feet!”

I’d only used a little bit of powder, so none of the wood had flown far enough to damage any of the houses, even the nearest ones.

I used the tongs to gather up the wooden shards that had flown the farthest—they’d landed two meters from the bonfire.

I faced the unit members again. “This gun makes use of explosions similar to the one I just demonstrated. Basically, you put a metal ball into the barrel and ignite the powder inside the tube, and then the ball will come flying out of the barrel. The metal ball will gain enough speed to kill any person it hits. Now watch as I fire one. I’ll fire two shots, then you’ll each take a turn.”

I picked up the gun, which was already loaded, and took aim at an earthen wall about ten meters away. A human figure had been drawn on it with charcoal. The gun fired when I pulled the trigger, causing fragments of the wall to crumble next to the figure’s head—I’d missed.

“Now I’m going to reload.”

I put the stock against the ground and used my teeth to tear open the end of a package wrapped in Ho paper that held a bullet and some gunpowder. I poured the gunpowder into the smooth barrel of the gun, followed by the bullet. I took the ramrod that was attached to the gun and plunged it into the barrel from above.

After putting the ramrod back, I lifted up the lowered flint, refilled the flash pan with priming powder, then closed the pan cover. All of this had taken about thirty seconds.

“Now I can fire the gun at any time by pulling the trigger. It’s a lot of effort, isn’t it? Now...”

I took another look at the unit members.

“I’m sure some of you are good with a bow. I imagine some of you could’ve easily riddled me with five or six arrows while I was messing around. In that sense, you could say that this weapon has less than half the power of a bow wielded by a skilled archer. When you think about it that way, a gun like this doesn’t seem like such a powerful weapon. In reality, however, this is what defeated us. In previous battles, one unit after another fell apart in the face of concentrated fire from guns like this. How did that happen? You can think about that while you’re waiting your turn. I’ll hear your thoughts on it later tonight.”

I passed the gun to Liao.

“As your captain and vice captains, we’ll give you instruction on firing and loading.”



By the time everyone had tried the gun, the sun was low in the sky. The bonfire we’d built in the center of the square still blazed brightly.

“Now for the night class. Did you have any thoughts while you were firing the weapon? If so, raise your hand.”

An array of hands went up.

“You first,” I said to a boy from the kingeagle company. “Otto Tem, right?”

Let's hear it."

"I thought of something," the boy said timidly. "Or, more like, I thought of something I wanted to ask. How much does that gunpowder cost?"

"Ah, that's an important question. It's thirty ruga for a single shot. But this is gunpowder that we imported while trading with Kulati, so it becomes more expensive because of the seller's profit margin and our shipping fees. We can estimate that it's about twenty ruga a shot for the Kulati."

"I see... I'm also wondering whether we could choose to fight on a rainy day."

Oh. That's some good insight.

"Yes. You're right that the gun will fail to fire more often if it's raining. Overall, it's a good thing for us. The enemy would have to protect the gun's mechanism, perhaps by covering it with cloth."

"I see. Thank you."

"Anyone else?"

Again, hands went up. They were excellent students indeed. Meanwhile, I was the type of person who'd never raise their hand at a time like this.

"Okay, you next. Judd Norm, was it? Let's hear it."

"I'm honored to be chosen. I was thinking that even without the gun, we should be able to make wooden rods like the one you showed us and drop them from a kingeagle. They wouldn't take anywhere near as much expertise to make as a gun, and they'd cause harm to the enemy when they exploded on the ground. What do you think?"

Wow, that's quite an idea.

"Well, it's a fine idea. Unfortunately, there's a fatal flaw. Ideally, any object dropped on the enemy would explode just as it hits the ground, or when it hits the enemy. Unfortunately, we don't have any way of controlling the timing. The explosion you saw earlier happened because I threw it into a fire. If I'd thrown it against the ground, it would've only shattered into pieces. You could wrap it in an oil-soaked cloth, then ignite it before dropping it... But even then, it'd be hard to make it explode as it hits the ground, and it would be unlikely to have

any effect if it detonated midair.”

As I spoke, his face became difficult to read—as if he hadn’t expected me to have already thought the idea through.

I made sure to praise him. “But it’s a good idea. Future advances in technology could make it possible. Although it’s not possible right now, it’s not too difficult to imagine a container with a weighted flint-and-steel mechanism that’ll hit the ground first and then trigger the ignition. Yes, it’s a good idea.”

Now, who’s next? Hmm... How about Dolla?

“You next, Dolla Godwin.”

I looked over at him.

“I thought...maybe...some knights can just wear heavy armor and charge at whoever has a gun...maybe.”

That was Dolla for you. I felt like applauding him for his total meathead approach. It was so like him that I almost laughed out loud.

“Yes, that may be the most realistic approach given our current equipment. The only problem I have with it is that it’s a heavy burden to place on those who’d be tasked with it. The knight chosen to be at the front of a column would be charging headfirst into a line of enemy soldiers who’re ready to fire a volley of bullets. If they were to flinch and slow down, the charge would lose most of its momentum, and momentum is everything. A job like that would need someone with true courage.”

A bigger issue with his idea was bayonets. Fitting a short sword or a sturdy spear to the end of a gun would turn it into a reliable melee weapon. However, the Kulati hadn’t come up with the idea of bayonets as far as I knew, so that aspect of war culture didn’t exist yet.

Since guns and spears were both in active use, soldiers carrying these two types of weapons handled long-and short-range combat respectively. There probably wasn’t much organization to it. I expected that on the actual battlefield, we’d find gunners alongside soldiers armed with a mixture of different weapons, such as bows and spears of all different lengths.

“Okay, next...”

Our gathering continued late into the night. When we finally brought the event to a close, it was only because the participants had grown tired and sluggish.

Chapter 3 — The Maelstrom of War

I

I arrived in Reforme a month after my previous visit, only to find the place in even more turmoil than before.

There was a clearing where kingeagles could land, but every other square inch was filled with provisions and other supplies.

Unsurprisingly, the area around the castle was under strict control, and much like during my last visit, it wasn't a place that commoners could easily approach. Once inside the castle grounds, however, people could move around as they pleased, and I could see numerous merchants strolling around freely.

"So... What do we do now?" I asked.

Given the circumstances, the bird cages would be full, and any eagle left tethered somewhere would likely be stolen. Even though we were near the royal castle, I didn't like the idea of leaving my eagle in someone else's care after what had happened on my last visit.

But like the high-born heir that he was, Liao was unflinching.

"My family had a tent set up outside the walls. My dad might be visiting the castle," he said.

"Oh, okay. Let's look for him."

Indeed, I'd seen numerous tents erected outside the castle walls. They clearly had kingeagles, since—from a bird's eye view—the ceiling fabric bore large crests representing chieftain families and the arrangement of the tents was obvious.

But not every tent bore a complicated crest—only those keeping kingeagles had them. The main tent didn't have anything on it. I'd never really thought about it, but such markings might guide an attacker if the Shanti people were ever to fight against each other.

“I know it’s a pain, but do you think we should take our eagles over to one of those tents first?”

“No, we should look for my dad and get some information. If he left the camp to visit the royal castle, he’ll have a sizable retinue with him. They’ll be able to take care of our birds for a while.”

“Ah, okay then.”

We asked around for the head of the Rube family and fairly quickly found someone who pointed us in the right direction. Along the way, we spotted a large group of adults in a corner of the castle’s courtyard that Liao seemed to recognize. We left our eagles with them before heading into the castle.

Liao’s dad was apparently somewhere in here.

The room we were directed to turned out to be a spacious parlor that had been given to the Rube family.

“Oh?”

An old man, who was sitting on the room’s finest chair, seemed to notice us. His surprise was evident when he saw Liao. He looked at him as if to ask, *“What’re you doing here?”*

This had to be Liao’s father—Kien Rube. Though his hair had all gone gray, he was in good shape, with muscles that hadn’t yet decayed at all. Even his facial expression seemed to radiate strength.

“Father.”

“Ah yes, you and the princess were planning on taking a trip here, weren’t you?”

The memory came back to him soon enough, suggesting that he hadn’t gone senile just yet. I’d expect any parent to be aware of their own child taking a long trip like this one. Then again, it was possible that the heads of long-lived warrior families tended to take a hands-off approach to parenting, and Rook was simply the exception.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said with a respectful bow of my head.

Liao introduced me. “This is Yuri. He’s our boss.”

“So I’ve heard,” Kien replied. “Please sit down.”

The adults sitting around him said their goodbyes and vacated their seats.

I couldn’t help but feel a little awkward at making some fairly influential people get up for us, but I thanked them and sat down nonetheless.

“I hope we’re not interrupting something,” I said a little apologetically.

“It doesn’t matter. We weren’t discussing anything important.” Kien looked at me once again. “Now, why are you here?”

Given that he knew his son Liao a lot better, it would normally be easier for Kien to get answers from him. For the time being, though, I was Liao’s superior. If he’d ignored me and talked to Liao instead, it would’ve been as if he didn’t recognize me as the superior officer. He’d no doubt considered that when deciding to ask me. Although I didn’t act like my unit was an order of knights, such considerations were natural when dealing with any type of military unit. Still, most people wouldn’t have given such respect to a group of students no older than their own son.

I gave him a straightforward explanation. “As you may have guessed, we’d like to find out when the war is likely to start. It would be embarrassing if we missed it.”

“Yes, it would. But I don’t have any idea.”

“I see.”

He’s telling me he can’t even guess?

Naturally, the enemy would be the ones to decide when to begin their offensive. Even if the enemy were to make very obvious preparations for an attack by arranging their military into formations just a kilometer away from our forces, it would still be difficult to determine exactly *when* the fighting would start. There might be no battle at all if the enemy decided to draw back.

But even so, it was normally possible to make an estimate by analyzing the happenings on the ground. For example, it could be based on the speed at which the enemy was marching toward us.

“The enemy’s acting strangely,” he added.

Ah, so that's how it is. The enemy's movements are so strange we can't make sense of them.

"What exactly are they doing that's strange?" I asked.

"They're moving slowly for some reason, as if they're busy doing something along the way. I don't know what it is, though."

"Ah, I see."

Hmm.

"What do you think it is?" he asked me.

"My guess would be that they intend to use a new type of weapon against Verdun—some sort of siege weapon that requires a lot of preparation."

Unless the enemy was completely stupid, they were bound to have considered new approaches for taking the fortress after their previous failure. If taking it by force hadn't worked, a smart plan might. That would be the rational solution. All humans learned from their mistakes, so it would be strange if they hadn't given the problem some serious thought.

"Yes, we suspect the same."

"Indeed."

Apparently, their prediction matched mine. The Rube family held chieftain status for good reason, after all.

Well, there's nothing we can do about that.

Fortunately, our camp wasn't far away. Liao could visit every few days and ask about the latest happenings.

Thinking we'd best not overstay our welcome, I decided it was time for us to excuse ourselves. But before I could, Kien spoke.

"By the way, is that a gun you're carrying?"

His sharp eyes had noticed the weapon I was planning to give away as a gift.

"Yes, that's right."

Guns weren't common among the Shanti, but they did exist; I'd even seen a

gun myself in a secondhand store in Sibiak. Some were poor attempts by the Shanti to replicate the technology, but most had been picked up on the battlefield. Without gunpowder, though, they simply amounted to useless war trophies. Although the Shanti had charcoal and sulfur, they lacked the technology for producing a steady supply of saltpeter—a necessity for making gunpowder. They could, of course, steal some gunpowder from the enemy and fire the guns by following the enemy's example, but after two or three shots, it'd go back to being an ornament.

"When was it made?" Kien asked.

"This gun was produced last year. It's from a nation known as the Flushia Kingdom."

"Ah, yes, I've heard you actually trade with the Kulati fiends."

Is my business really that famous? Well, it's hard to hide it when we import so many popular goods.

"Let me see it," he said.

"Very well. I brought it with the intention of presenting it to the royal family."

I figured I'd better say something first in case he got any ideas about keeping the gun for himself. I unwrapped it and passed it to him.

This gun must've originally been used by a noble, because it was a beautiful piece. The wooden stock had been decorated with fine engravings and coated with the same type of high-quality varnish used for stringed instruments. The varnish's sheen had dulled a little because we'd used the gun so heavily over the past few days, but I'd managed to restore it somewhat by polishing the whole thing with an oilcloth and cleaning out all the soot from the barrel's interior.

"Hmm..." Kien studied the gun closely with great interest. "All right."

He handed the gun back to me. Just as I was about to wrap it back up in the cloth, he stopped me.

"You don't need to wrap it," he told me.

"Oh?"

But why not? I thought as I studied his face.

“The war council’s about to begin,” he explained.

“War council?”

“Her Majesty won’t be in attendance, but His Majesty the prince consort will. You can give it to him there.”

“Ah...”

At first, I’d thought he’d meant a war council between members of the Rube family, but no. It sounded like a meeting for the top brass.

But still, why not wrap it? Putting a cloth around has to be better than handing it over as it is...

“Liao, you’ll attend too. You’ll learn something.”

What? Learn something? He’s making it sound like this is some laid-back workplace where people can bring their kids along. There’s no way we can agree to this.

“Yes. We’ll gladly accompany you,” Liao accepted willingly.

Ugh...



“Sorry,” Liao mumbled to me as we made our way there.

He must’ve felt that he shouldn’t have answered the question before checking with me.

“You’re the Rube family’s heir. That’s more important than your position in our unit. I don’t mind you handling some personal business while you’re here.”

“Thanks.”

“If I really didn’t want to be here, I would’ve asked you to hand the gift over, then left.”

Gaining new and unexpected tasks was certainly tiring, but I was curious about this council. It was being held to discuss the very situation I wanted to know more about, so listening in would give me a good sense of the big picture.

The only problem was that the situation might become awkward if the other council members didn't take kindly to having two youngsters in attendance, but I'd live with that.

We stepped through an open door and found a map lying on a grand and heavy-looking elliptical table.

There were already several people sitting around the table. I didn't know their names because this was our first meeting, but I assumed they were more lord-supremes from chieftain families, or similarly important people.

"Bring two seats," Kien commanded. "They're here to listen as my attendants."

Someone who was helping to set up the council quickly put down two new seats at the edge of the room without any questions or complaints.

Oh, good, we don't have to sit at the table. This is much more relaxed. I'll just keep my mouth shut over here.

I sat down on a chair beside the wall, positioned behind Kien.

"Can I ask you something?" Liao muttered as he sat beside me.

"What?" I kept my voice down. I would've hated it if someone got angry about the attendants chattering.

"How do you feel right now?"

What kind of question is that? I guess I'm not feeling great about seeing a bunch of sweaty old men gather round. I know I'd much rather watch Sham happily eat some tasty treats.

"What do you mean? I'm not ill or anything."

"This war council could decide the fate of a nation. It'll change the lives of countless civilians."

Ah, that's what he's talking about.

The thought of these important statesmen making major decisions in front of us might've been uplifting for him, but I suspected he was about to be let down if he was expecting anything dramatic to play out. Then again, it was possible

that there'd be some heated arguing.

He might've been imagining that someone would have a revolutionary idea, and—thanks to an emotionally moving speech—convince the others to agree...or perhaps that a genius strategy might be formulated and immediately put into action, leading to a significant blow against the enemy forces several days from now. It would result in the date of this council being recorded in the history books for eternity. The chieftain family system meant that the council was unlikely to be quite so theatrical, though, and both scenarios were unlikely.

The council would almost certainly come to predictable conclusions. In such a meeting with no leader, risky methods that went against ordinary thinking would never be accepted, even when they were necessary.

When I thought about the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani from Japanese history, I couldn't imagine the strategy used there ever being born from several people holding a conference. No matter how well Yoshitsune might've argued his case, mediocre officers wouldn't have understood his genius. Some would've argued: "We can't make it down that cliff. Do you mean to waste soldiers' lives?" It never would've been possible to get everyone's agreement.

Even in a democratic political system, the ruling party couldn't enact transformative legislation without majority control. The only bills that would be passed in that situation were ones based on ideas obvious to everyone. Here, it would be the same, except it was military strategy rather than legislation.

"You must be a romantic," I said, using a specific sense of the word.

"What?"

"You sound like you're expecting this to be like watching a play."

I wasn't sure whether he expected a comedy or a tragedy, but he expected something big.

"Watching? We're part of this, aren't we?"

Are we? I guess we are, in a sense.

"That sounds like something Carol would say," I told him. "Did your sympathy for the local people make you sentimental?"

“Ngh... Maybe...”

It seemed I was right. Although Liao was over the age of twenty, he was still young. He could still be softhearted.

I remembered him talking rather coldly about the Kilhinan people in the past, but his thinking must’ve changed significantly after coming into contact with so many of them firsthand as he’d led the provisions company.

“There’s not much any individual can do,” I said. “If I were all-powerful, I’d want to make the Kulati happy too, not just the Shanti. I’d rid the world of war and make sure everyone could live without ever going hungry, even those born with disabilities. But, sadly, that’s not possible.”

“Those are some big thoughts you’ve got,” Liao remarked in surprise.

“Yeah. When I’m in the mood, there’s no limit to what I can dream up. But in reality, I can only affect the things within my power. You’re getting sentimental because you see the tragedy around you and feel like someone has to do something, right?”

“Maybe...”

“In reality, there’s nothing anyone can do.”

“Really? Someone must be able to do *something*,” Liao replied.

“No one can.”

“What about you? If you were trying to change things, what would you do?”

“Nothing.”

“If you tried.”

How come he’s so talkative today?

“No matter what means I use, underhanded or otherwise, I can’t bring these chieftain families under my control before the fighting starts. That means I’ve got no power to influence anything. So no matter what I do, I can’t change the state of this war. It’s impossible.”

For example, suppose I killed the head of every Kilhinan chieftain family gathered at this council. Then suppose, as ridiculous as the idea is, that I won

the prince consort's favor and the queen issued an order that made me the successor to every chieftain family. I'd then be the commander in chief. Even in that impossible scenario, it would still take time to bring all their forces under my control.

The death of a commander whose bonds were forged by blood and history would always result in great upheaval. Establishing order and restoring the army to the point where it could actually function would take a year at best. Naturally, the nation's forces wouldn't be ready to fight after a week or two.

No matter how optimistic my thought process was, I had to conclude that I had no power to influence the outcome of the war, no matter what I did.

"We could consider what I might do if I could control all of our armies, but that future will never exist. It's not a meaningful premise—it's sheer fantasy and wholly unconstructive to even consider the idea."

Liao fell silent; I didn't feel the need to check his facial expression.

We passed a few moments in silence.

"Yeah, you're right," Liao said.

Some time later, all the participants had gathered, and the prince consort was the last to arrive. He was looking far more haggard compared to when I'd last seen him. That wasn't a surprise—I could think of a long list of problems that might be taking a toll on him.

"Now, why don't we begin?" he said weakly as he looked at the participants.

As he scanned the room, his eyes met mine. I nodded slightly, and he looked away. This was no time for catching up with a child he'd met once before, so ignoring me was the natural thing to do.

"Sir Kookus, I'll let you oversee the proceedings," the prince consort said.

The old man named Kookus simply replied, "Your Majesty."

Kookus Leki. I recognized the name, but not the face. Given his seating position—the second highest at the table—I could guess that he was the head of the Leki family without being told. At any rate, he would be assuming the

role of commander for now.

He should've been chairing the council from the start, but the aristocratic system in place said that the prince consort ranked above him due to being royalty. The prince consort had had to start us off for that reason.

"Now, let us begin the war council," Kookus said.

Discord soon followed.



"But why are you suggesting that I give you my cavalrymen?! They're vital to my own army! Why would I give them up?!" a man named Otter Gaji cried.

Feelings of resentment and resignation were starting to dominate the meeting. As far as I knew, Gaji and Lexi were both chieftain families on equal terms, but Otter's tone was scathing. Perhaps the families were rivals, or maybe it simply boiled down to Otter's personality.

Kookus, our supreme commander, appeared to be quite a rational man. For the umpteenth time, he tried to talk Otter into agreement. "We can't afford to make the same mistakes we made last time. We should counter their riflemen by charging at them with a large plainrunner cavalry. But if each chieftain force were to attempt a separate charge whenever it was most convenient for them, the enemy would repel us effortlessly."

Concentrating our plainrunners into a large cavalry and charging at a single location could turn the tide in our favor. It was such a simple idea that even Dolla could have come up with it, though that didn't necessarily make it bad. The simplicity of the strategy was what made it powerful.

Unfortunately, there would always be families unwilling to part with their knights. It wasn't just Otter—I could tell from where I sat that the others around him shared his thoughts, though they hadn't voiced their objections aloud. In fact, it was true of the chieftains visiting from Shiyalta in particular. Kien Rube had agreed because he'd felt the urgency of the situation, but Orone Bof and Bolafra Noza—the representatives of the other two chieftain families—sat in sullen silence. Anyone could see that they didn't want to part with any soldiers.

Given that this crisis felt much less pressing to them than their Kilhinan

counterparts, their main aim was to keep their forces' losses to a minimum, regardless of whether it meant victory or defeat.

The Kilhinans, meanwhile, had the opposite viewpoint: *"We're the ones who defend the front line, so it should be Shiyaltans who handle the heavy fighting. Whether we win or lose, we'll need to preserve our forces."*

Even if the invaders were driven out, there was always the possibility that they would return, and the Kilhinans couldn't count on the Shiyaltans to be so generous in their assistance efforts the second time around.

Neither side was wrong. Each was in a fundamentally different situation, so it was inevitable that they wouldn't see eye to eye.

"The soldiers you're asking to borrow are all men that I trained myself. It's obvious that no one can apply them better than I can. In your hands, they'll be reduced to a tenth of their original strength."

Otter had gone back to making absurd counterarguments. There was a grain of truth in there, but when he'd said "a tenth," it had been sheer exaggeration, and frankly, I doubted that troops under his command were capable of godlike tactical maneuvers.

I'd been listening to this pointless debate for just under an hour now, so I was all too eager to leave.

"The only reason we met with defeat last time was because our troops lacked morale," Otter continued. "If we can inspire a fighting spirit in our men, they'll scatter the Kulati rabble with ease. We're wasting time with these clever little strategies when it's morale that gives an army strength. Giving encouragement to our soldiers is key here!"

Listening to his speech from the sidelines almost made me lose all hope. It was a completely worthless argument, and it bothered me so much that I wanted to put my hands over my ears.

His idea—raising morale to guarantee victory—was no better than saying, "We'll win the war if we make twenty of Battleship *Yamato*!"

It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd actually suggested a practical way to increase morale. He could've suggested turning a blind eye to any pillaging by

the soldiers, or giving them a monetary reward for every Kulati right ear they could collect. But no—he thought he could raise troop morale with just a bit of encouragement and inspiration.

If you were to apply the same reasoning elsewhere, you get arguments like, *“If they don’t have cannons, just give them a hundred cannons. If you can’t supply them, it’s because you’re not trying hard enough.”*

“Besides, we still hold Verdun Fortress. It has never fallen. We also have ample provisions and arrows this time. We’re worrying over nothing!”

As Otter began to get more and more worked up, Kien raised his hand.

Kookus’s face seemed to relax when he noticed. The council’s time had largely been taken up by arguments between Otter and other people—it couldn’t really have been considered a discussion. Kookus must’ve been relieved that someone capable of sensible statements was about to contribute.

“Sir Otter, it appears Sir Kien has something to say. Return to your seat. Sir Kien, go ahead.”

Kien stood up, turned around, and walked toward me.

Wh-What?

“Sir Yuri, could I borrow that?”

Huh? He’s talking to me?

“Y-Yes, I don’t mind.”

I handed him the gun.

Kien took it and then returned to the table.

“This gun was acquired from a Kulati nation by Yuri Ho here. It’s the latest model used by the enemy. I also have another gun here, left behind by the enemy after the previous war.”

Kien took another gun from one of the servants who accompanied him, then placed the two side by side on the table.

“When we compare the two, it’s clear that the new model is lighter, even though the barrel’s diameter is roughly the same... I don’t know whether it’s

made with new materials or a different manufacturing process, but they've made their guns easier to carry," he noted, sounding impressed.

That was news to me—I'd never compared the two models of guns myself.

Since guns needed to be carried, reducing the weight was entirely beneficial. I suspected they'd used thinner metal in the gun's body. Materials would improve with advancements in metallurgy, allowing guns to retain their durability despite using thinner metal. In fact, since guns were a fairly recent invention in historical terms, advancements in metallurgy might not have been needed. A simple process of trial and error might have revealed the ideal thickness, leading to a reduction in unnecessary material use.

"Why would you expect Verdun to hold out forever against an enemy like this? Imagine how it looks to our soldiers—while the enemy grows stronger with each passing day, we fail to plan or innovate. Given the anger and resentment they must feel, how can we expect to instill a fighting spirit in those men? Well, Sir Otter?"

Otter was scowling, but still he smiled.

"Sir Kien, how could they breach Verdun? I don't think there *is* a way to breach such an impregnable fortress."

"Hmph... Yuri, what are your thoughts on this?" Kien asked.

Huh?

"He's studied the Kulati more than anyone else his age. He's mastered their language, and even trades on their lands."

Huh? How can he do this? He can't just dump this all on me. It's like passing the soccer ball to a spectator and shouting, "Here's your chance! Score us a goal!" Talk about a killer pass.

The prince consort chose now, of all times, to speak up. "Well, Yuri? Give us your thoughts."

Damn.

"As you've all just heard, my name is Yuri. I'm afraid I was merely passing through and hadn't prepared myself to offer opinions here. I've never actually

seen Verdun with my own eyes. I've heard stories, but I haven't seen so much as a picture."

"No matter. Just tell us what you think," Kien said.

Are you kidding? I'm supposed to act like I'm an expert on a fortress I've never seen?

"Well...this is based on no more than my imagination, but if I had to breach Verdun...I'd attack the mountainside entrance. That is, I'd break through the front gate."

Verdun Fortress had an unusual construction. It was a military fortress built on the top of a rocky mountain that had been worn down by quarrying. The quarrying work on the mountainside had carved out a space that created a cliff edge, which acted like a natural fortress wall. Well, perhaps "natural" wasn't the right word, given that it had been carved by human hands. In any case, it was a high, indestructible stone wall that made attacks using siege towers infeasible. The whole structure was essentially a mountain castle. There was only one entrance, and the gate there was on a slope.

"How would you break through?" This time the question came from the prince consort.

I would've been stressed out if Otter had been the one asking the question while piling on the pressure, so the prince consort had probably chimed in first to stop that from happening.

"Well... I'm told that there's a steep incline leading to the main gate, making it impossible to approach with siege towers or battering rams. Using gunpowder would be easiest. I believe it would be costly—but possible—to make a gun large enough to destroy the gate. Alternatively, an explosive device packed with vast quantities of gunpowder could be affixed to the gate and then detonated... Though I'm not sure that would work."

The latter of those approaches would be easiest. Something like a shaped charge with lots of gunpowder wrapped in plate metal could be attached to the gate and detonated.

"Is gunpowder really enough to destroy the gate?"

“That depends on the gate. If the gate were a metal plate as thick as a person’s arm is long, then that would naturally be indestructible. But if we’re talking about a wooden gate reinforced with iron, then destroying it wouldn’t be difficult.”

“Hm... So we should consider the idea that the enemy possesses a device capable of destroying the gate?”

I definitely did not say that.

More than likely, he was twisting my words in order to back up his own suspicions.

“You’re getting ahead of yourselves,” Otter said in a lofty tone. “How do you know such weapons even exist?”

“We don’t, but we can’t rule it out,” Kookus said. “What happens if the enemy *does* have such a weapon when we assume they don’t? If we’re caught off guard and need to evacuate Verdun, we’ll be pushed as far back as Reforme.”

He was repeating a point that had already been mentioned once during the council.

Kien cut him off. “Sir Kookus, why don’t we ask Yuri about that too? Yuri, how would you fight this battle?”

He turned his chair sideways so that he could look at me from his strange sitting position.

Why? Forcing me to give my thoughts here is too much pressure.

“Well... I’m still young, and I hesitate to venture an opinion in the face of veterans such as yourselves.”

I knew they’d just twist my words to suit themselves anyway. Since I had no idea how they might misrepresent me, I preferred to keep my mouth shut.

“No matter. Speak.”

But I don’t wanna, and you know it. Then again...if Kien Rube’s going to be feeding us information, I guess I should cooperate at least a little.

“I think it would be best to avoid any confrontations on level ground.”

“Oh?”

“The enemy’s strength is in their guns and troop numbers. I’m sure you’re all aware that guns are at their most powerful over flat ground with high visibility. On the other hand, they’re difficult to use in forests where trees block the line of sight. If we draw the enemy into the forests, their guns won’t be much of a threat. Our own weapons won’t be affected. Moreover, the enemy’s army is a gathering of different forces, so they’ll lack the organization needed for effective command within a forest. We’ll have an advantage in that regard. If it were my decision, I’d abandon Verdun, fight the enemy in the forests, and try to hold out until winter. At the very least, I wouldn’t choose to fight under conditions that favor the enemy.”

In other words, guerrilla warfare. The enemy wasn’t prepared to deal with that sort of resistance.

“Ha! You mean you’d run!”

Otter gave his odd outburst without rising from his chair. It was annoying to get such a rude response from someone who hadn’t even grasped what I’d just said.

“Sir Otter!” Kookus rebuked him sharply as chair of the council. It was no doubt an expression of his gratitude toward the Ho family.

It occurred to me that Kookus must’ve felt the same irritation I did while chairing this council, but a hundredfold. It was no small thing that he still spared a thought for me. I would’ve gone crazy in his position.

“Please think nothing of it,” I said. “These are just the ramblings of a child.”

The atmosphere had already soured to the point that we weren’t going to get anywhere.

I didn’t want my own opinions to be used by others anymore, and there was also a risk of saying something that brought shame on my family.

Let’s just get out of here.

“I’m afraid I must excuse myself.” I turned to the prince consort. “Your

Majesty, I brought the gun as an offering to you. I'd be honored if you'd accept it."

I saluted them, then stood up from my chair and walked out without waiting for permission to leave.

II

A week later, I was in my room on the second floor of the mayor's home staring at the bear's gallbladder hanging by the window.

It was drying out nicely thanks to the region's crisp air. Soon, it wouldn't look anything like a waterskin-type thing anymore. It was gradually becoming black and wrinkled.

I lost myself in thought as I ate the bread I'd made with yeast brought back from Reforme.

There'd been no change in the approach to the war. The Rube family's knights had begun to move two days ago.

The Rube family had set out already due to logistical problems caused by a lack of advanced transportation.

Keeping an army gathered in one place was costly. Troops needed feeding, and tens of thousands of men could devour even the largest of supplies quickly.

Keeping ten thousand troops clustered together was fine, but the surrounding region, which stretched over a few kilometers, wouldn't be able to produce enough extra food to feed ten thousand unproductive mouths. They could rely on their stockpiles and the local food supplies for a day or two, but if they stayed for weeks, they'd have to bring in extra rations from far away at great cost.

Requisitioning or pillaging food from the local population would make little difference. No matter how hard a village of five hundred people was squeezed, it wouldn't produce enough food to feed such great numbers.

Such issues were easily solved if there were paved highways, railways, locomotives, and automobiles. If there was a way to ship in large quantities of

supplies from afar, hundreds of thousands of troops could stay in the same spot for a month. As long as funds didn't run out, bringing in the food required wouldn't become an issue.

But in this world, supplies had to be driven by a horse over roads that were merely cobbled. Naturally, the army had horses, carts, and funds to purchase supplies, so repeatedly delivering supplies to the region wasn't impossible. As time passed, though, the supplies would have to come from farther and farther away as they diminished the resources over an ever-growing region. The cost grew along with the distance. It would always grow unaffordable at some point.

All of this meant that troops needed to be spread out until a battle took place.

This was why, rather than heading directly for the battleground, the Rube family's forces would make a camp somewhere not far from Reforme. In other words, I'd know the fighting was about to begin when they began relocating to the battleground.

I was still lost in my thoughts when I heard a clattering sound as the door opened.

I looked over to see Myalo.

"Oh? Yuri, what are you looking at?"

"This? It's a bear's gallbladder," I replied while looking at the strange object hanging beside the window.

"Oh? So that's what they look like." Myalo, of course, had heard of it before. "You must've gotten it after killing the bear."

"I've never dried one before. I'm looking forward to seeing how it turns out."

Long ago, I'd enjoyed putting time into little tasks like this. Though I'd given it up in my adult life, I'd once grown crystals. Fiddling with things like this too much could ruin them, so it was best not to touch them unnecessarily.

"I've never actually eaten one."

Both you and Carol, huh, Myalo?

Given Myalo's weak constitution, I would've expected her to be given something like this to restore her strength. I started to wonder if I'd only been

able to try it as a child because I'd once lived outside of the city.

"Oh, really? You wouldn't guess just by looking at it, but they're incredibly sweet."

It was a total lie.

Myalo put her hand to her mouth and chuckled. "Heh heh. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I already know they're awfully bitter."

"Ah..."

Really? That sucks.

Myalo's reaction to my attempted prank wasn't what I'd expected. I couldn't be too surprised by her knowledge, though. She wasn't as clueless about the world as Carol, after all.

"It might've been amusing if I didn't. It's a shame I already knew."

"Yeah, it could've been good. I wanted to see your face when the taste caught you by surprise."

I would've loved to see that.

"Now that you mention it, you might've seen me looking ghastly. Now I'm glad I knew."

I couldn't help but laugh. "That's what you're afraid of?"

"Heh heh... Huh?" Myalo's smile became stiff.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, uh... I wonder..." Her face gradually became more stern.

"What's up?"

"Um... I'm sorry. I came here to report something, but I can't remember what it was."

She seemed genuinely apologetic and flustered. It was rare to see Myalo forget this sort of thing.

"That's fine. It can't have been anything important."

If Myalo had forgotten about it, it had to be something trivial.

Myalo might occasionally forget a handkerchief while out somewhere, but she'd never leave a pot of oil on the stove. As someone who took pride in her capabilities, she wouldn't let herself down like that. If there'd been some sort of crisis that required an immediate response from me, she wouldn't have bothered with the light chat beforehand.

"Sorry. Let me go check," she said.

"Forget it. Here, drink some tea."

I put my hand to the teapot resting on the table. I took a teacup from the shelf as if I was in my own home, then filled it. Finally, I pulled up a chair for her. "Now sit."

"Um... If you're sure..."

"Of course I'm sure."

Many other members of our unit had kept themselves busy by caring for the horses, plainrunners, and kingeagles, but—after we'd remained stationary for a week—the horses and eagles were all properly groomed. We were all left with time on our hands.

Some spent their time training with sticks, others gathered and chatted like youngsters, and some found other activities. Regardless, all of it was just to pass time; none of it was work.

One exception was a group of talented kingeagle riders who, in preparation for a particular task, spent about an hour training with their eagles each day—a short enough time to ensure they wouldn't tire the birds out. Still, even that wasn't exactly work.

Amidst it all, Myalo was still busily running around, so you could say she was the most hardworking person here. No one would blame her for taking a few moments to rest.

"Well... If you don't mind."

Myalo took a seat opposite of me.

I pushed a basket of bread toward her. "Want some?"

"Am I really allowed to eat this?"

You can eat whatever you like...

“What’s got you so tense, Myalo?”

“I’m tense?”

Apparently, she hadn’t noticed it.

“You don’t ask before eating in the dorm, do you? Why would you need permission from me first?”

She should just say thanks and start eating like she would anywhere else.

“That’s true, but...we’re on a mission.”

Well, I guess you’re not wrong but...

“You can forget all that when it’s just the two of us. Mission or no mission, you’ve got to relax sometimes.”

It was why we did things like giving someone permission to drink after they’d been on night duty. And if other people were drinking alcohol, there was no need for Myalo to hesitate over a little bread.

“Yes, you’re probably right.”

“Or maybe you just don’t want to spend your break with me?” I asked.

“That’s not it! It’s definitely not that. I enjoy my time with you...”

“Well, eat up then. Before it goes cold.”

Bread was best when freshly baked, after all.

“Okay... Thank you.”

Myalo took the large slice of bread in her hands, broke it in two, and ate one half.

As she was chewing it, she said, “This is...great. It’s better than bread from a professional baker.”

Well, the average baker wouldn’t be quite so extravagant in their bread-making process. I’d kneaded butter into the dough, added small cubes of cheese, baked it, and then coated the whole thing with heavily salted butter. It probably contained a ton of calories, but my salted-butter-cheese-bread was a

real treat.

“Seems like you’re a fan of it.”

“Yes. Everything you work on turns out great, Yuri.”

Now she was praising me for it. Compliments scared me. It was something I’d never grown used to—I was never sure whether I should be happy. Taking them to heart could inflate the ego, and for some people, using compliments to manipulate others was like second nature.

“Oh, you’d compliment me for anything.”

Myalo must’ve sensed how I felt, because she added, “Not just for anything.”

“You wouldn’t?”

I think she would.

“How about I disparage you a little instead?”

Disparage...?

“Um... That might be fun. Give it a try.”

Come to think of it, she’s never once so much as called me an idiot.

“Well... You’re awfully lazy. Oh look, you’ve got bedhead. You know, little things like that are where the real problems start.”

“Oh, I didn’t know I had bedhead.”

I realized that I hadn’t looked in a mirror at all that day. I ran my hand through my hair and, sure enough, I found a clump sticking up. It wasn’t a big deal, but it could make me look a little stupid in front of the unit members, so I figured I’d better fix it. I’d have to go get some water later.

“Heh heh. See? I don’t compliment everything.”

Um... That was supposed to be disparaging?

“Yeah, I guess not.”

“I wouldn’t say, ‘That bedhead looks so good on you,’ would I? Heh heh.”

I’ve never heard anyone talk about bed hair looking good. It would just sound like sarcasm.

“Then how about I try complimenting you?” I suggested.

This'll make her squirm.

“Me?”

“Well, for starters, you’re incredibly attentive and intelligent. You’re more knowledgeable than anyone, and you’re wise too. Your competence couldn’t be any more obvious, even if someone were to write the word across your forehead.”

“Um...”

“You’re also hardworking, and I know you won’t betray me. Your pretty face means you’re nice to look at too. There’s so much I could compliment you on that I’m not sure I can put it all into words.”

“Um, I... Um...”

At this point, Myalo covered her face with hands and turned away from me.

What’s she doing? Is she gonna start playing peek-a-boo?

“What’s wrong? Don’t you like compliments?”

“S-Stop... Please...stop.” Her voice trembled a little. “I’m so happy I can’t help but, uh...grin.”

“Grinning? That’s what you’re doing?”

So much she wants to hide it? I wanna see.

But pulling her hands away to see would mean grabbing both her arms like I was assaulting her. The mental image alone stopped me from trying it.

It felt like she stayed like that for two or three minutes. Finally, she turned to look at me again.

“Phew. I’ve calmed down.”

What was all that about?

“That wasn’t right, Yuri. You shouldn’t flatter people like that.”

“I was just saying what I really think. I wasn’t making anything up.”

“Please—Oh!” Myalo froze like something had just come to her. “I just

remembered why I came here. The horses are chewing buckets and licking rocks and trees, so we think they must need more salt. Liao's going to buy some in Reforme. I gave him the money."

As expected, it was an inconsequential report.

"Ah. Sure, that's fine. Sorry you have to deal with everything."

"Don't be. The whole reason I'm here is to make sure these little things don't trouble you."

That sure makes life easy for me. If she wasn't looking after me, would some freeloader have latched on to her? Actually, no—Myalo wouldn't even waste her time on a man like that.

"I'm glad you're willing to work, but you should rest too. Now's the time to get all the rest you can."

"It is?" Myalo didn't look at all convinced.

"Before long, we won't have time for rest. The journey back is always going to be harder than the journey here. It wouldn't make sense to use up all your strength before the crucial moment."

"Ah, you have a point."

"I appreciate your efforts, but we shouldn't overdo it."

That felt pretty rich coming from me, the guy who'd been sitting around since noon staring at a drying bear's gallbladder.

"Yes, I understand." Myalo nodded as if I had her full agreement. "Well, I've rested a little, so I think I'd better go."

"Okay."

More work? I've got to give her credit.

"See you," Myalo said softly as she left the room and closed the door behind her.

I went back to my own work. To anyone watching, it would've simply looked like I was spacing out.

Before I knew it, the bread had gotten cold.

I'd found the Kulati camp from the air. Stardust beat his wings as we flew through a clear sky—perfect scouting weather.

Stardust tilted to one side, giving me a slanted view of the ground below over one of his wings.

From the air, the Kulati camp looked like a disorderly mess. It was big enough for tens of thousands of soldiers—far bigger than any of the Shanti camps. But even from the vague impression I got from far above, I could tell that they were a ragtag bunch of allied armies.

Among the national armies, there'd be mercenaries hired on a temporary basis too. The scene was sure to be even more chaotic when viewed from the ground, but I couldn't see that level of detail from up here.

Each nation's army had their own territory within the sprawling camp, and their different colored tents were like tiles in a great mosaic.

I could hear dry popping sounds from below. The wind carried the sound away, making it barely audible, but I recognized it as gunfire. I saw several plumes of white smoke being whisked up and away by the wind.

I'd already researched the range of their guns when fired directly upward, so I knew that I was safe as long as I maintained this altitude. The enemy must have known this too—their shots were merely a warning.

It was probably less that they wanted to deter me from scouting, and more that they wanted me to know that they were ready for me if I got any ideas about attempting a suicide attack.

The proof was in the fact that they hadn't fired any arrows—those were too quiet to serve as a warning. Then again, arrows would be a hazard to the camp since they'd reorient themselves arrowhead-down while falling.

I guess we'll head back.

I blew a whistle and waved the flag on a pole I was holding. This was an instruction to the kingeagles following me. A few moments later, I heard Carol whistle in response from the center of the formation.

I guided Stardust as he turned us around, the wind blowing loudly through his wings, ready to head back the way we came.

As a precaution, I wasn't going to head straight for Nikka village where our camp was located. We'd correct our course later.



I removed my safety harness.

"All troops, release your harnesses!"

Carol, my second-in-command, gave the order to the other unit members. It felt overly formal and cumbersome, but this was the way we'd been taught at the Knight Academy, so we stuck to it.

I just hoped no one would be outraged over me leaving Carol to oversee little tasks like that.

Once they were off their eagles, the students formed a line, evenly spaced apart, near me. They held their reins in their hands.

"Roll call!" Carol said.

They began calling out numbers, starting with the student on the rightmost edge. They stopped once they reached twenty-eight.

Thanks to kingeagles being loaned out to the students who'd brought plainrunners, over half of our unit had now been able to see the enemy camp for themselves. Naturally, the only ones with the right to view the actual battle would be the twenty-eight students who'd brought kingeagles of their own, but seeing an enemy camp was better than nothing.

"Thank you for your efforts, everyone. I'm sure you're eager to tether your eagles and rest, but first I'd like you to check their well-being. It's possible that a bullet hit us. Even a hit from a bullet that's lost most of its speed can cause a broken bone. Once you've performed a quick check and tethered your eagle, you may disperse."

We hadn't just flown too high for shots to be fatal, we'd flown too high for them to hit at *all*. The odds of a bird being injured were next to none, but I still wanted to make sure.

There was always a chance that someone had loaded twice as much gunpowder into their gun, risking the chance of it exploding, in an attempt to hit us. Even in that case, a spherical bullet wouldn't pierce through an eagle's bones or skin, but a fracture may have been possible since the lightness of their bones made them less robust. At any rate, a crash would've been practically impossible.

I took my watch from my pocket and checked the current time.

"Okay, in about three hours from now—a little after we've eaten—we'll hold a conference. Please gather your thoughts regarding everything you saw today. That's all. Disperse."

Having given the order, I also made a brief check of Stardust. After quickly checking regions of his body one after another, I found no injuries, which was no surprise.

I took the reins and led Stardust to a stable near a house where I tethered him. Next, I fetched some food for him—cuts of venison thigh—from a storehouse.

Stardust lowered his beak.

"Go ahead and eat, Stardust."

I gave Stardust permission to eat, but his beak didn't move.

Huh?

I stared at him. He appeared to have no interest in the meat at all.

"What's wrong? Aren't you hungry?"

There's no way he's not hungry. Don't tell me he's sick?

"Kuuur... Kuuuur..."

I didn't understand why, but he rubbed his beak against my cheek.

Rub, rub. Rub, rub.



It didn't hurt, but it didn't exactly feel good either. It was a strange feeling.

"What's wrong?"

It's not because it's mating season. Maybe he just feels nervous flying over strange places?

I wasn't sure whether it was possible, but perhaps Stardust had somehow felt the growing tension of the battlefield.

I decided to groom his feathers a little to help him relax. I scratched the feathers around his head, and after a short while, it seemed to calm him down. His mood visibly improved.

"Now eat your food," I said, pointing to the meat.

This time he did as he was told.

What got into him just now?

"Hey, Commander," said a voice behind me.

It was Liao.

"You're back? How was it?" I asked while washing the raw meat from my dirty hands in a nearby bucket.

Liao had been paying regular visits to his family to ask about the current situation.

"They say the battle's tomorrow."

"I see. That figures."

If the enemy continued marching at the pace we'd seen for the past few days, then tomorrow would be about right. That being said, the enemy had actually slowed its pace while they'd unified with detached forces from different places. I'd witnessed their movements firsthand, so I was all too aware of it. I'd been going out to observe the enemy myself every day. Just a little bit of daily reconnaissance had been enough for me to figure it out, so our side's forces—having infinitely more resources to spend on reconnaissance—would have seen it all too.

So our forces clash tomorrow.

“Make sure the horses and eagles are in good shape and ready for us to go home. If it looks like we’ll have any grains and beans left over, put it all in their feeding troughs.”

“All right, I’ll see to it.”

Since horses weren’t ruminants, they couldn’t digest grass as efficiently as animals like cows. Mixing grains and beans with their grass would give them strength.

“Oh, that said, you should feed some of it to them tomorrow and the day after too. Check with Myalo first.”

“I was going to.”

It felt like I was leaving all the responsibility to others, but I didn’t want to meddle carelessly. The provisions company had been managing the horses and wagons just fine up to now, so I’d only cause extra work for them if I stuck my nose in this late in the game.

“I imagine the Rube family’s main camp was hectic.”

Since this was the night before a battle, the soldiers in their camp would all be on edge.

“Yeah... I guess it was. But they still welcomed me when I arrived, so it wasn’t too bad.”

No one in the camp was stupid enough to ignore the family’s heir.

“All right. Glad to hear it... Now, one last thing. Tomorrow I’ll be leading a few kingeagles away to do my own thing, just like we arranged. It won’t take long. I’ll be leaving Carol in command, but you keep your wits about you too.”

“My wits? What’s that mean, exactly?”

“Well, first, I’m worried about altitude. You’ll have a better view if she takes you lower to the ground, but then someone could get shot.”

Liao seemed astounded. “Yuri... Just how stupid do you think our princess is?”

Huh...? I’d better explain myself carefully.

“I’m not saying she’ll do it, but she’ll be busy, and she’s not used to being in

command. She might struggle to make rational decisions,” I explained.

“But you won’t be gone long. Unless something goes wrong, we’ll just be waiting in the air for you to come back.”

“You can never be too careful. It’ll be over for anyone who crashes in the enemy’s camp.”

That would result in a literal bloodbath.

“Yeah, we know that.”

Still, they’d only be watching over things until I got back. Nothing would happen. They weren’t little kids, so they weren’t going to dart off after the first thing that caught their attention.

“Okay, I’m probably just worrying too much... I should be thinking about our trip home after the battle. Let’s not mess that up.”

We didn’t have to worry about rush hour, but we knew the roads would be busy. If possible, I wanted us to head back before the roads got *really* bad with other forces. Needless to say, a victory for our side in battle would help there.

“Got it. I won’t cut corners.”

“I’m counting on you.” I patted Liao on the shoulder.

We’d probably have to deal with all kinds of unforeseen trouble the next day. Hopefully, none of it would be major, but it was best to plan for as much as we could.



It was the day of the battle.

I looked back to see twenty-seven kingeagles flying in formation behind me.

They were flying in a V shape, with Stardust at the front and the other birds forming diagonal lines at either side of him. We were copying the behavior of migratory birds so that each eagle could use the wingtip vortices of the bird in front to reduce the effort needed for flying.

The downside was that this left us more spread out than in our usual compact formations, so communication was now more difficult. For that reason, this was

just a cruising formation that we'd abandon once we reached the battlefield in favor of something more compact.

We could see the battlefield coming into view below us.

Thick blankets of white smoke rose from the front line where both armies' foot soldiers would clash. There was so much that it was as if the fields were being burned off.

At the same time, I heard faint sounds like firecrackers going off. It was a line of soldiers firing their guns.

We'd arrived a little late, but we couldn't circle the sky above the battle for very long. If we'd arrived too early, we might've had to leave right when the battle started. All things considered, our timing was probably ideal.

My reaction to it all surprised me. I felt drawn to the battle in a way I hadn't anticipated. It was a feeling of, *Oh hey, look, there's a fight!*

If this world had a god, he might've secretly enjoyed watching over human conflicts like this one. I certainly felt I could watch it forever, but there was something I had to do first.

Peeep! I blew on my whistle and gave a signal with my flag.

The flagpole was actually just an ordinary spear covered by a sheath, and the flag itself had been tied to it. I would've preferred leaving something as bulky and useless as a spear behind, but it was the most basic thing for someone to carry when heading to a battlefield. At least, that had been the majority's opinion, so I'd agreed to carry one.

As Stardust shifted the angle of his wings, five eagles left the formation to follow me, just as we'd planned.

I looked behind me and saw the formation smoothly rearranging itself. Carol took my position at the front, filling the gap I'd left.

I headed on toward the enemy's rear. After traveling a few kilometers beyond the battle lines, I saw the enemy's main camp.

This was our target. The camp's soldiers had been dispatched to the battlefield, so there likely wouldn't be anyone to ward us off. To the enemy, it

would be like a surprise attack had hit them from behind. If all went well, their forces could be thrown into disarray.

Our target was their resources.

I led the eagles toward a site where the enemy was storing a mountain of supplies. I'd chosen this spot several days earlier.

I slowed down, almost to the point of stalling, to minimize the wind resistance as I removed my lighter from my pocket.

I held the lighter in two leather-gloved hands, low against the saddle, and lit it. I parted my fingers just slightly so I could see the flame as I used it to light three fuses. Thanks to the large size of the lighter, the flame didn't go out in the wind. The fuses began to sizzle once they were ignited.

Each of the three fuses was attached to a homemade Molotov cocktail, which in turn was tied to Stardust's side.

The bottles we'd used to make our firebombs were simply earthen pots with narrow necks. It felt a little odd, but all that mattered was that the liquid inside wasn't leaking out. Each was filled with a flammable liquid—the first fraction to come off when distilling crude oil. We'd then stuffed an oil-soaked rag and the fuse into each bottle's neck.

The fuses were made by sprinkling gunpowder onto glue-coated paper, then wrapping it around a cotton thread that had been soaked in oil. If we'd simply ignited the cloth, the high winds would extinguish the flame as it fell from the air. This design had been reached through trial and error. Even if the cloth's flame went out, the fuse within the cloth wouldn't, so the firebomb could still be ignited.

Once I'd confirmed that all three fuses were burning, I had Stardust rotate his wings to send us plummeting down headfirst.

The maneuver was similar to a free fall. Our speed steadily increased. As we raced toward the ground at a suicidal rate, an instinctive sense of fear filled me.

Once we'd gotten low enough, I pulled on the string used to tie the firebombs in place. An instant later, I gave a strong tug on the reins.

I felt the g-force against my whole body as Stardust's wings caught the wind and turned our descent into horizontal flight.

Rather than following us, the firebombs that had been held by the string plummeted to the ground.

The students behind me—all exceptionally skilled kingeagle riders—dropped their own firebombs in the same way. Theirs, however, weren't lit. I'd only brought a single lighter.

Our horizontal flight became an ascent, and once I'd gained enough height to relax, I directed my attention to the world below.

I saw the flames burning brightly. The initial three bottles I'd dropped had been enough to get a fire going, and it had spread thanks to the other bottles scattering the fuel they'd contained.

A sea of flames had appeared on the enemy's small mountain of supplies, and now the surrounding area was being scorched black.

Once I was at a high altitude again, I continued on toward the next target.

I had three more firebombs.

I lit another fuse and had Stardust angle his wings. This time we entered the fall a little more smoothly than before. My sharp eyes could clearly make out the ground as it rushed toward us, and the fear gripped me once more.

I dropped the remaining bottles and pulled Stardust up so we could level out again. With another pull on the reins, I guided us higher.

This time, heat, an explosion, and a blast wave all came at once. *Boom!*

I felt heat, like the fire of a furnace, against my neck and a rush of expanding air pushing against my back at the same time I heard the sound.

That same force against my back also hit Stardust's wings as he tried to ascend, and through the reins I could sense his surprise.

We didn't stall, though. I instinctively knew to pull the reins to one side, instructing Stardust to roll, and he complied.

We accelerated as if his wings had caught something solid. We were rising on

a current of air created by the heat below, so Stardust barely had to move his wings at all as it carried us upward.

When I looked back, I saw that all five of the riders who'd come with me had managed to keep up. They were, after all, the best of the best. Still, I could see their eagles' wings beating furiously as the birds were similarly taken by surprise.

That was close.

When I looked down to see what had happened, carnage lay below me.

A cart of flammable fuel within the supplies must've exploded. Burning debris had been scattered in all directions, setting several tents ablaze.

I broke out into a cold sweat. *That was close. I didn't expect that.*

We'd already ascended a little before the explosion had gone off, saving us from harm. If the explosion had happened right after I'd dropped my firebombs, I might've felt the full impact of the blast and crashed. Even if I'd survived, the riders behind me would've plunged right into the explosion. Someone might've died.

Regardless, our side mission was a success.

I decided it was time for us to return. I waved my flag proudly, then pointed the spear toward the main kingeagle company.

It was then, as I looked toward the kingeagles I'd left under Carol's command, that I realized they were dealing with a situation we could never have predicted.



For a moment, I couldn't believe my own eyes. It felt rational to conclude that this was all a dream. The sight before me was just *that* unbelievable.

In the sky, some distance away, the company was being attacked by a massive dragon—a winged lizard with a body as big as three kingeagles combined.

The great beast was charging into the center of the company, causing the orderly formation to break apart as riders scattered in all directions.

Before rational thinking could convince me otherwise, I instructed Stardust to head toward it at full speed. I spared no thought for Stardust's stamina as he forcefully flapped his wings. One wingbeat followed another, and we accelerated as one being.

Why's there a dragon here? Never in all of history has a dragon ever attacked us Shanti. Why now? Why here?

Stardust carried me with such speed that I could feel his heat through the saddle. We soon reached the main company.

Now that I was closer, the sight was still hard to believe. The eagles flew this way and that, getting so close to the dragon that they almost collided, but it was no use.

The dragon and the knight straddling its neck were entirely focused on just one kingeagle. The eagle's rider was wearing white armor, and blonde hair extended from beneath their leather helm—it was Carol.

He must've noticed her hair. Of course he would.

The other eagle riders were doing what they could to protect her. Each took it upon themselves to block the dragon's path, but the relative sizes of the two creatures meant it did little.

Then my attention shifted elsewhere.

Mountain Haze's wing beats are weak...

Her dull, sluggish movements suggested the eagle had been drained of stamina after persistent attacks from the dragon. Eagles would soon tire if they were forced into reckless maneuvers to dodge attacks, in addition to beating their wings desperately to prevent a stall and then accelerating.

Mountain Haze was the dragon's sole target. Even if she tried to flee now, there'd be no escape. The dragon would follow, no matter how far she went.

Put simply, there was no way out.

Having reached that conclusion, my body seemed to move on its own.

I climbed to a higher altitude above the dragon to give myself an advantage in terms of potential energy, released the strap that bound my spear to my

harness, and removed the sheath so that the flag was removed along with it. As I readied myself, I gave the spear a half-turn spin in my hand and assumed a backhand grip.

I plummeted downward, on a collision course with the dragon.

While concentrating hard, I gave slight tugs on the reins to make minor adjustments to our heading.

The dragon grew larger in my vision. Once I was on a clear collision course, I pulled on the reins twice to instruct Stardust to land.

Stardust must have understood what I wanted him to do in an instant. Without a hint of panic, he obediently changed his orientation and stretched his legs out toward the dragon.

We kept going until Stardust and the dragon collided. Stardust's talons buried themselves into the root of the dragon's wing, tearing at the flesh. Then, as Stardust was passing over the dragon, I plunged my spear into the dragon's torso, as if driving a stake into the ground.

The spear pierced a scale and penetrated deeper. An instant later, through the shaft in my hands, I felt the hard spear tip rupture the skin beneath and tear into the dragon's soft flesh.

Having crossed paths with the dragon, Stardust began to move away. When I felt a shock that seemed like it might pull my arm from its socket, I released my grip on the spear.

I knew I'd done some damage—I'd felt it.

I didn't know how hardy the dragon was, but I knew it couldn't remain in the air with serious injuries to its wing and torso.

Stardust, meanwhile, had escaped the encounter unscathed. We'd stalled and entered free fall, but recovering wouldn't be difficult when the ground was so far below us.

I was filled with a sense of accomplishment—I *won*.

It was then that weathered scales filled my vision. It was the dragon's massive tail.

I doubted it had been at the dragon rider's command. If anything, the dragon was likely consumed by rage. It was a natural way for such a creature to attack while airborne. Its tail moved with incredible accuracy.

I predicted the tail's path using my intuition, and—after making precise adjustments to account for our relative speeds—I knew that it would hit.

The law of inertia held great importance here in the sky. There was very little we could do to prepare ourselves.

Stardust's wing appeared to be the intended target as the tail made contact. There was a cracking sound as the impact left Stardust's wing bent at an unnatural angle, like a broken branch.

I felt a crushing sense of despair fill me. We couldn't fly with one wing.

It's over.

Stardust and I stalled and began tumbling through the air.

The broken wing was completely useless. The feathers that should've caught the strong air currents were feebly bending out of shape as the wind hit them. Now that his wings weren't catching the air, the acceleration caused by falling wouldn't be enough to recover from the stall.

Overhead, I saw that the dragon was falling too.

The damage we'd done appeared fatal. Unlike an eagle, the dragon's wing was webbed, and the largest area of its webbing had been torn to shreds.

But even now, while the dragon was falling, it appeared to reach out to bite the slow-moving Mountain Haze's wing.

I didn't see what happened next. I heard branches breaking, followed by a hard impact against my body.

Chapter 4 — The Taste of Dirt

I

Consciousness came back to me like a bubble rising through water.

I opened my eyes and saw branches in front of me. Last year's fallen leaves and tree limbs were being exposed as the snow thawed. There was also tree bark that had rotted over the course of winter, becoming wet and black.

When my brain recovered and my consciousness regained its sharpness, I felt a throbbing pain through my entire body.

I tried to look at myself to figure out what had happened and found myself in an unusual posture. I was hanging upside down with my shoulder barely touching the ground.

I must've been unconscious for a while.

Memories of what had recently happened came back to me. I'd crashed after being hit by a dragon's tail.

My safety harness wasn't undone, which meant I was still attached to Stardust. That explained why I was held up by my waist.

Stardust...

I braced myself, ready to release the harness, then felt pain shoot through my lower back. The impact of the crash must've been transmitted to my back through my hip.

If my pelvis is broken... The thought filled me with dread. I knew I'd be stuck right here if that was the case. *No... I can't think negative thoughts. It's times like this when staying calm matters most.*

I endured the pain as I released the harness. With nothing to hold me up, my lower half fell down to the ground.

I braced myself for pain around my waist as I tried to stand. Although it did

hurt, my movements felt natural, like nothing was broken. All of my body's joints moved just fine when I tested them.

I didn't want to look at Stardust. I tried to mentally prepare myself for it and felt a crushing sense of pessimism wash over me.

I moved a few steps away, then looked.

Stardust was still breathing, and his eyes blinked at me. His wings were a broken mess, though.

Stardust had landed on his side, and the joints of the wing beneath him had been bent into unnatural angles by the impact of landing. The bones of the other wing were also clearly broken—the wing's feathers no longer fit together. They were spread helter-skelter and looked unkempt.

He must've clawed at the trees as we crashed, because his toes were broken and bent backward, and his talons had been torn loose. His legs were useless.

Stardust opened his beak and took shallow breaths. The damage must've extended to his internal organs as well.

I understood immediately. *Stardust must've broken my fall. He saved me. But...what can I do for him now?*

A single broken wing was enough to leave an eagle invalid. With both wings broken and his legs ruined, Stardust wouldn't even be able to sit down to sleep.

There's nothing I can do for him. I knew it from experience.

If this had been on our kingeagle ranch in Ho Province, where the best care could be found, and if Rook—with his wealth of experience—had been here to attend to Stardust's every need...it would still be hopeless. His injuries were too great.

The right thing to do then, for an eagle so badly wounded, was to euthanize it.

But this wasn't just an eagle—it was Stardust. We'd been flying together ever since I'd joined the Knight Academy eight years ago.

He let himself be hurt so I wouldn't be... I owe Stardust my life, but I can't do anything for him. What a debt to repay. But he'll die before I can...

“Kuur...”

There was no strength in Stardust’s voice. He was looking at me, but I had no way to know what he wanted, or what he would’ve said to me. Birds didn’t have facial expressions, after all.

Perhaps he blamed me, or perhaps he was glad I was safe. Maybe he just wanted release from the pain. I couldn’t know.

If only Stardust were able to talk, I could’ve followed his wishes. If he resented me, I would’ve begged forgiveness while crying over my own ineptitude.

But the reality was that Stardust couldn’t talk, nor could he understand human words. Anything I thought I knew would just be me interpreting the situation to suit myself.

There was only one thing that I could do for Stardust now.

I didn’t know whether it was what he wanted. Maybe he didn’t, and I was just doing it for my own satisfaction. It was possible that I was about to act without heart or gratitude toward the friend who’d saved my life, but I had to act.

If I was going to do it, then prolonging his pain would be the cruelest thing I could do.

I drew the dagger at my back and looked at the blade. I was checking to see how badly it had been bent within the sheath. Fortunately, it wasn’t damaged at all. It shone just as it had when I’d last sheathed it.

Stardust didn’t react, even when he saw the dagger.

Does he know what I’m about to do...?

“Stardust...”

I held Stardust’s face, and the muscles around his neck softened, as if it helped him relax.

“Thank you. It’s because of you that I’m still alive.”

I’m sorry, I said in my mind.

I plunged the dagger deep into the back of Stardust’s neck, then jerked it

sideways. I felt the sharp blade slice through the bone, severing the brain stem.

Stardust's body didn't so much as twitch. His neck went limp as he passed, and I felt the full weight of his head in my arms.

Ah... He's dead. The friend I've always flown with is dead. Because of me.

I carefully laid Stardust's head on the ground and sheathed my dagger. Next, I plucked his three largest flight feathers and placed them in the bag that had been on his saddle.

I would've buried him if I could, but it wasn't an option. There was so much I had to do.



Now what?

The first thing that came to mind was the observation unit.

I had no idea how much time had passed while I'd been unconscious, but Carol or Liao had probably taken command. Although I was unsure what had become of Carol, I knew she'd been in trouble. Chances were, it was Liao who'd taken over.

In fact, it was even possible that the observation unit was still in the air. As I looked up to the sky, I hung on to that glimmer of hope. But of course, the same trees that blocked the sunlight also obstructed my view. I couldn't so much as tell the weather.

I looked around for the biggest tree in sight and decided to climb it.

It was a struggle because I felt my muscles might give way at any moment. I was struck with intense pain several times on the way, but I managed to get to the top and broke off the branches around me.

Now I had a clear view of the sky.

There they are.

Kingeagles circled above my head, and in the distance—about three hundred meters away—another group of kingeagles of about the same size were doing the same thing.

I blew my whistle, drawing the nearby eagles' attention to me.

When one of them came lower, I immediately recognized it as Liao's eagle.

An eagle couldn't hover in the same spot for a long time like a hummingbird could. Liao seemed about to attempt it, but soon gave up. Instead, he angled the bird sharply and began turning in small circles so that he'd stay within my view.

First, I gave a sequence of peeps from the whistle. We'd agreed on several whistle signals in advance, and this one meant "Where's our princess?" In other words, I was asking for Carol's location.

Liao didn't tell me she'd died, nor did he say she was with the formation. Instead, he sounded his whistle to signal, "Come here." For a moment, he stopped circling around and pointed the spear holding his flag toward where the other half of the eagles were gathered.

So Carol crashed too.

Half of the group had come to my crash site to search the ground for me, the other half to Carol's.

I thrust a hand into my pouch and retrieved my compass to check the direction. It had a metal ring, marked with an arrow, that surrounded its glass face. I rotated the ring to mark Carol's direction. If I went back down to the ground, I wouldn't be able to see the circling kingeagles.

This is gonna be tough.

Kingeagles couldn't land in forests. It was probably why they were only found in a limited number of habitats and hunted in rocky areas. They were simply too big to live in wooded areas. A kingeagle couldn't crash into a forest's treetops and come out unscathed.

The structure of their wings created further problems. The most important part of an eagle's wing was the collection of primary flight feathers near the tip, and flying would become impossible if these were broken. Since the most easily snagged areas of the wings were also the most important, crashing through treetops to land safely in a forest was a hopeless task.

For an eagle to be able to land safely, there generally needed to be a clearing with a diameter of about seven meters. Landing was perhaps possible in a five-meter clearing, but this was no neatly organized tree farm—it was a dense forest. There was no chance of finding a five-meter clearing among the trees.

There was another problem too.

I could tell that Liao's eagle was exhausted as it struggled to stay balanced. Although Liao's eagle hadn't been raised by Rook, it was still a well-trained bird. If it was tired, the others were probably at their limit already.

The other eagles certainly wouldn't be able to continue circling above the region three hundred meters away until I got there.

It wouldn't take me long to run that distance if I were in good shape, but given the pain I was in, I doubted I could run at all.

Peep pip pipeep! I issued the signal to ask about the kingeagles' status. I got four short whistles in response: *Pi-pi-pi-pip*.

We could rank the health of our eagles into five different levels. Level five was basically, "I'm at my limit and about to crash. Bye." Liao's response meant that he was close to his limit if he took the journey back into consideration.

That left zero hope of him carrying Carol with his eagle.

One option would've been to meet up with Carol, move to a clear area, and then have everyone take off on their eagles from there. That would leave two members of the units—I wasn't sure who—to return home on foot. However, there wasn't time for any of that. And since the whistles were our only form of communication, we couldn't put together any complicated plans like specifying a clearing where we'd all meet up a few days later.

I made up my mind and gave three long pips from my whistle: *Peep, peep, peep*.

The signal I'd given meant, "Go back."

Liao whistled in response, telling me, "We lost."

We lost? We lost what?

He pointed in another direction with his spear.

I understood the meaning once I'd checked my compass. If the forest I'd crash-landed in was where I thought it was, then he was pointing toward the region where the main battle had taken place.

So the Shanti forces really did lose. Given our situation, I'd hoped for a victory more than ever.

Liao next gave the signal for "Roger that" before raising up his spear. For a few seconds he messed around with something, then he dropped the spear close to my position. I noticed something had been tied to it.

If he wants me to use it, I'll be glad to.

Perhaps unable to circle any longer, Liao turned his bird around and rejoined his formation before leading them all away.

After climbing down from the tree and finding the spear and useful items Liao had dropped, I began walking.

It was difficult to trek through this forest. Since Kilhina bordered the hostile region that practiced Yeesusism, people were unlikely to live here. Wood was a necessity in everyday life, so if there'd been anyone living near the forest, it would've been somewhat tamed. But it wasn't. Although it wasn't a primeval forest, it felt as though people had given up on managing it and left it to grow wild.

"Ah, damn... Ouch..."

Complaining wasn't helping, but I spoke before I could stop myself. I took care to walk over even ground, but I still felt pain in my lower back. Even a tiny fracture would've swollen up from internal bleeding as I pushed myself to go on, so I didn't think the issue was my bones.

If I'd been enjoying a leisurely stroll on my day off, now would've been the perfect time to take a break, but I couldn't. I had to find out what had happened to Carol; I couldn't waste a single moment.

Negative thoughts began to run through my mind.

Hopefully Mountain Haze broke her fall and saved her just like Stardust did for me... What if it's the other way around...? If Carol's ended up like Stardust and

she has injuries I can't treat, what'll happen to her? What if she's still alive in that state?

Without realizing it, I came to a stop as the blood drained from my face. If that were the case, I might have to put an end to Carol's life just as I'd done for Stardust.

I shuddered. Unfortunately, the thought wasn't unrealistic.

It's more than possible...

An icy chill ran up my spine, and my stomach churned. Nausea washed over me. I was so horrified that I couldn't even think.

Seconds later, I realized I'd stopped moving, so I began to walk once more.

Thinking about it won't do me any good. Nothing's certain yet.

I'd been walking in the direction marked on my compass the whole time.

Just as I was thinking I must be close, I heard a growl, one a wild beast might make to warn someone off.

Why now...? Do I keep going, or should I stop? My lower body's so weak that I don't think I can win a fight against a wild dog, let alone some fearsome forest creature. But it could be growling at Carol. I have to keep going. Is Liao's spear really all I've got to rely on...?

I crouched low and began to creep toward the sound.

Ah...

I understood once I'd gotten closer. Amid the trees, I saw the wing of a dragon moving.

The green skin was flecked with gray and covered in small scales, like that of a tropical lizard. Its texture looked wet, yet smooth like silk. Its scales were like armor made from an array of small plates.

The growling beast had actually been this groaning dragon.

Based on what I knew, the dragon wouldn't be lying there if it were in a healthy state. At the very least, I didn't think it would get up and attack me.

Phew, I sighed as I slowly made my way around the dragon.

Fortunately, I was starting to feel better. The adrenaline must've started to kick in, because I barely felt the pain now.

If the dragon was here, then the dragon rider—or his body—might be here too, just like how I'd landed with Stardust.

As I proceeded, giving a dragon a wide berth, I spotted someone I'd never seen before. They had their back to me, but the design of their clothes was completely unfamiliar, suggesting they were from another culture entirely. They were wearing a gray turban on their head, which wrapped around their jaw and forehead. It was probably a traditional design worn by dragon riders.

That's the dragon rider. No question about it.

Farther up ahead, I spotted a kingeagle. It wasn't moving an inch, meaning it was most likely dead. From its plumage, I recognized it as Mountain Haze. She must've crashed after being bitten by the dragon, causing them to land in the same place.

That was when I realized that Carol was next to Mountain Haze. She was slumped down, as if her waist was in pain, and...she was holding her dagger to her neck.

She was ready to kill herself.

I felt a chill, like icy water was flowing down my back.

Carol was facing the dragon rider. The dragon rider, apparently trying to stop Carol from killing herself, was pointing a small knife at her and yelling.

He can't speak Terolish?

I guessed it was Anish—the language spoken in regions that practiced Kokorlism—but I didn't understand it. The intonation was closer to Shanish than Terolish, except that it was highly nasal in a way that was unfamiliar to me.

Given that Carol was trying to kill herself to stop him from taking her captive, I imagined he was yelling something like, "Stop! Surrender and let me tie you up."

I had to act as swiftly as possible. Unless I did something, Carol would die. I didn't have time to come up with a strategy.

The feelings inside me created a rush of adrenaline that cleared my head and made my pain vanish. I felt like I was merely a machine.

I emerged from the trees.

As I moved closer, Carol noticed me and looked my way. The dragon rider noted the shift in Carol's gaze. He was about to turn around.

"Hey, lizard rider."

I used the Terolish derogatory term for dragon rider as I raised the spear in my right hand to my shoulder. My hope was that the sound of someone speaking the language would leave him confused for a moment as to whether I was friend or foe. Then, without waiting for the dragon rider to finish turning, I launched myself forward with my left leg. When my right leg hit the ground, I threw the spear from close range.

The spear was still flying at full speed when the man twisted his torso to look at me. The weapon buried itself in his right arm.

Shit. I threw it too early. I should've hit him in the torso. Though these self-deprecatory comments ran through my head, I also thought, *I got him.*

The spear had opened a wound in the same arm he was using to hold his knife—his dominant arm, in other words.

I hadn't stopped running as I threw the spear. I charged at him, grabbed the shaft sticking out of his arm as I crashed into him, and drove the spear deeper in.

"Guh..." The man groaned, but he stood his ground without falling down.

All the force disappeared from my body as a result of crashing into him.

"Yah!" As I lost momentum, I stepped forward and then stomped on the man's knee.

As I felt the bone crack beneath my foot, I used the kick to push myself away from him and tore the spear loose.

My last attack proved too much for him. He lost his balance, and the hand holding his weapon touched the ground as he went down.

I thrust the spear downward without a moment's hesitation. His hand was now pinned to the ground. Next, I spun around and swung my bent knee at him. Given our close proximity, and the fact that he was crouching on the ground, I was able to connect with his jaw. I felt my knee knock his chin aside, and then the man fell limp to the ground.

I've won.

I watched him for a few seconds, but he didn't so much as twitch.

"Haah... Carol, are you okay?" I asked, looking away from the man.

Having secured a victory, I relaxed and felt human once more. Exhilaration flooded my body, along with the warmth that follows exercise.

"Y-Yes."

What do you mean, "yes"? You don't have to answer like I'm one of your teachers or something. Are you really okay?

I turned my attention away from the man to study Carol, but I couldn't see any life-threatening injuries. She wasn't bleeding, and there was no sign of internal injuries either.

What a relief. I was relieved down to my very core.

"First let's put the blade away," I said.

"Ah, ah... Y-Yeah..."

Carol's hand was shaking as it held the dagger. It looked like she'd been ready to kill herself—it hadn't been a bluff. She moved her trembling hand slowly away from her neck, and then, after a little hesitation, she returned the dagger to its sheath. She was safe.

I turned to look at the dragon.

The dragon could see that its rider had been knocked unconscious by an attack right in front of it, but it showed no interest.

It seemed that dragons didn't build the same relationship of trust with their rider that a kingeagle did. Perhaps it was more a case of the trainer somehow suppressing the wild beast's tendency to attack humans and having them direct

their anger toward the trainer's enemy instead.

The way it had knocked me out of the sky was consistent with that theory. There would've been a slight delay if it had been waiting for an instruction to attack from the rider, but its response had been instant. It was like the dragon had been following its instincts and rampaging as it pleased.

I was still curious about the dragon, but it felt safe to turn my focus elsewhere. It seemed unwilling to move. It might've suffered internal damage—either from the fall, or from the spear that I'd thrust through its wing and into its body.

It would die before long, and it wasn't likely to attack as long as I didn't provoke it. I didn't consider retrieving my spear—that would've been provocation.

"Carol."

"Uh... Okay."

What's she mean, "okay"?

"Liao and Myalo were flying overhead until just a few moments ago. Liao told me that our side lost the battle," I explained. "What I'm saying is, things will only get worse if we stick around. It won't be friendly soldiers who come looking for us next; it'll be the enemy."

"O-Okay. I understand..." Carol sounded depressed—though she had every reason to, of course.

Now that I'd found Carol and had a moment to think things over, I knew that we'd pretty much experienced the worst-case scenario. It made me light-headed when I tried to imagine all the problems we were going to have to deal with after this.

"Do you get that?" I asked.

"Get what?"

"That they'll come after us if we stay here. We need to move now."

Though the dragon rider had been able to see Carol's blonde hair from close up, it was doubtful that the Kulati on the ground had noticed her during the

battle.

But she was a blonde Shanti nonetheless. Once the enemy knew, they were certain to give chase. I'd heard that the enemy considered a blonde Shanti—a beautiful one at that—valuable enough to be used as a bargaining chip in international negotiations. National policies might be altered in exchange for her. According to Ms. Ether, such a thing had actually happened about thirty years ago.

In short, the enemy considered her priceless.

The enemy on the ground wouldn't have been looking for Carol, but dragons were so rare that they were bound to have taken interest in the aerial combat. That meant they'd already know that two kingeagles and a dragon had crashed. It was even possible that there'd been someone with keen eyes—or maybe a telescope—who'd seen that one of the kingeagles carried a blonde rider.

"Sorry..." Carol apologized for some reason. She looked more than just sorry; her eyes were filled with tears of remorse.

"For what?"

"My leg... It's bad. It hurts so much I can't stand up."

Neither of us spoke.

Ah... What a mess.

For a while, all I could do was remain rooted to the spot in stunned silence.

I realized that she would've gotten up to fight the moment the dragon rider had appeared if she could have walked at all. Instead, she'd simply sat on the ground with the dagger to her neck, threatening to take her own life. Whether she suffered from a broken bone or a torn muscle was unclear, but she definitely couldn't walk.

"Just go on without me..."

I could hear sadness in her voice that she was trying to hold back. When she asked me to leave her, she really meant it. She'd be able to cling on to the slim hope that someone would come to save her. If the Kulati found her first, though, she'd kill herself.

“Out of all the dumb things I’ve heard you say, that might be the dumbest.”

“Huh...?” Carol spoke in barely more than a whisper.

“You know I can’t leave you.”

“But you’re in danger if you stay here with me.”

“I’m not giving up that easily. Your life’s worth more than that.”

But we are in grave danger.

I felt like I was about to sigh; then I did.

How are we going to get out of this one? I’ll have to carry her. There’s no other way. It was a surprisingly easy conclusion. *But how far can we get...?*

Reforme was out of the question with Carol on my back, but we could head for our camp in Nikka instead. Still, it would take us over a week to get there.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if I’d had flat roads to walk along, but now that we’d lost the battle, the major roads would be crawling with enemy soldiers. If I were alone, I could run off into the forests where their horses couldn’t easily follow until my pursuers gave up, but that was out of the question while carrying Carol. All the luck in the world wouldn’t be enough.

Despite the lack of paths, we’d have to walk through the forest.

“I guess I’ll carry you...”

I said the words out loud to make my decision final. It sent a wave of despair up my spine.

Carol was slim, but still muscular. It wouldn’t be like carrying a child.

Even if we were to travel light, we’d still need some belongings. I wouldn’t be able to carry more than fifty kilograms. I knew I had strong legs, but with fifty kilograms on my back, I probably wouldn’t have been able to outrun even Myalo back when she’d first joined the academy.

If we were being pursued, I’d be slowed down too much by Carol. It’d just be a matter of time before they caught up.

If I could grovel before god and ask him to cast Curaga or Midheal to heal Carol’s wounds, then I would’ve lowered my head to the dirt right there and

then. The situation was so dire that prayer looked like the best option.

We should've been ready to make sacrifices. The whole kingeagle company should've crash-landed in the forest with her...

Sure, a few of our remaining twenty-six kingeagles and riders would've died in the process, but I'd have a force of about twenty with me. Then maybe we could've broken through when our pursuers finally caught up.

But we wouldn't have had enough supplies... We could forage for enough food to feed one or two people as we walked, but we'd never find enough to feed twenty. We would've starved in just three or four days.

I need to stop. Why am I wasting time on pointless thoughts? I asked myself. *Think about what you can do right now. We could dig a hole right here and hide... It could work.* I knew there was someone who'd definitely try to save us. *The royal sword.*

Even if it meant throwing away her own life, she'd come for us. I wasn't sure whether it would take her three days or four, but if she made it here, she could carry Carol while we ran. She was nimble and highly skilled, and she'd trained in ways that most people couldn't even withstand. But even so, I didn't think she'd be faster than me while Carol was on her back.

We could lessen the burden by taking turns to carry her, but the person carrying would always set the pace—it wouldn't double our speed.

It's hopeless.

Her arrival wouldn't improve our situation enough to make up for how much it would be worsened by failing to move now.

I really am going to have to carry her.

Since there was a chance that Carol had been seen, I had to assume that there'd be pursuers. At the very least, I needed some way to stop them from catching up with us.

I looked at the unconscious dragon rider. His arm was bleeding profusely.

I realized I could use him to fool the enemy somehow. We'd lose time, but the enemy would be moving faster anyway. Running away without action would

only delay the inevitable; it was better to take a chance with this idea.

I lifted the man's upper body and began to remove his armor. Though it looked very different from ours, it was also made of lightweight leather—evidence that even a powerful dragon had a limit to what it could comfortably carry.

It wasn't just that either. He had a small frame and wasn't overly muscular, just like us. Once I'd removed the armor, I removed his helm, greaves, and clothing, leaving him in his underwear.

"Yuri, what are you doing?"

My weird behavior must've made Carol nervous.

I couldn't waste any time, so I didn't stop to explain.

I took off my own armor and put it on the man while making sure he wasn't about to regain consciousness.

Rook had prepared this fine armor for me. Unfortunately, I had no choice but to abandon it before we did anything else. The size wasn't quite right, but I forced my armor onto him anyway. Once I'd put on the whole set—greaves, helm, and all—I lay him on his back.

Then I searched around and brought back a large rock. I lifted it up high then dropped it on the unconscious man's face.

The man's body spasmed upon impact. The rock hit him with a dull thud, then rolled off his face to the ground.

His face was caved in and covered in blood, but I knew he was still breathing from the small red bubble of blood that was forming at his broken nose.

I picked the rock up again and threw it down with some force. This time the man didn't so much as twitch. His face was destroyed beyond recognition, with exposed patches of pink muscle visible everywhere. Blood coated the armor that I'd made him wear.

I forced the blood-covered helm off the man's head and gently tossed it away from him. Next, I took the large knife he'd been carrying and hit it against a nearby rock to chip the blade. I used the ragged blade to cut off one of his

earlobes, then used my own dagger to cut off his other ear.

Now I'd faked my own death. I'd ridden Mountain Haze, fallen off my bird while crashing, and been unfortunate enough to hit my face against a rock when I'd hit the ground, killing me on impact.

The dragon rider was still alive. He'd taken one of the enemy sky knight's ears as proof of his kill before disappearing somewhere. The helmet had been covering the Shanti's ears, so the dragon rider had violently pulled it off and thrown it aside.

The remaining ear was badly damaged, but the body was dressed in Shanti-made armor, making it clear that this was a dead Shanti.

It was a crude and imperfect attempt to deceive the enemy, but it was better than nothing.

A junior soldier would likely discover the body first, and the enemy's army lacked a well-organized chain of command. The pursuers would be confused. There'd be a split in opinion. It would lead to arguments... Hopefully. Maybe they'd even be satisfied with finding the body of one Shanti and give up on hunting for the other.

This is all just wishful thinking...

I looked at my hands and saw both were caked in blood and dirt.

I guess I'll wipe them off with a rag. No... I'd better wash them. This feels disgusting.

I used some of our limited water to wash my hands.

I borrowed a few necessary items from the dragon rider, then walked back to Carol.

I'd been surprised to find a shortbow and arrows among the items that he'd unloaded from his dragon. Maybe it was common for dragon riders to fire arrows from the sky.

There was nothing unusual about the bow and its arrows, but the quiver was special. It was roughly cylindrical, but the opening looked designed for use

during flight where it might be shaken violently or turned upside down. There was a spring mechanism that held the opening closed to prevent the arrows from falling out.

There were about five arrows inside the quiver. Two of them were unusually long, and when I took them out to examine them, I found they had no arrowheads. Instead, those two each had a spindle-shaped tip. They were whistling arrows. When one of these was fired, the wooden tip would make a shrill sound as it flew through the air. It was basically like the arrowhead had been substituted for a whistle.

Unlike the whistles we used, the sound would continue for as long as the arrow flew, making it possible for those far off to hear the sound. It was probably used to contact people on the surface.

The whistling arrows commonly used in Shiyalta generally had simple arrowheads alongside the whistle, but these ones were probably designed for firing over the heads of allies, so the tip was round instead. The other three arrows were standard arrows, which were perhaps used for firing at enemies on the ground.

“A-Are you all right?” Carol asked, sounding nervous.

“What makes you ask?”

“Your face is white.”

Ah... That's why. I've gone pale.

“I’m fine... It was my first time killing someone, so it got to me a little. I’m more worried about your health.”

“Y-Yeah... It’s just my leg. Everything else is...fine.”

That's good news. Well, I can't call this good, but if she isn't complaining of a headache, then at least she's not concussed. If only it had been her arm instead of her leg... But what's done is done.

“Okay. You don’t have to remove your armor or anything. Wear it while I’m carrying you.”

“You’re sure?” Carol sounded surprised.

“I don’t want our pursuers to know that you’re royalty. There’s a big royal crest on that armor. If we’re going to throw it away, let’s get away from this spot first. I’m going to scrape the crest off Mountain Haze’s saddle too.”

It was possible that the pursuers wouldn’t even recognize Shiyalta’s royal crest, but it wouldn’t be surprising if they did. After learning from experience, I’d made sure to use a saddle that didn’t have a Ho family crest on it, so I wasn’t worried about them inspecting Stardust.

I approached Mountain Haze’s body and scraped away the crest with a knife. I removed some flight feathers while I was at it, just like I had with Stardust.

It was common practice for kingeagle riders to keep a few feathers from their favorite eagles. They were like remains, or a keepsake, that could be put on display for the rider to look at and grow nostalgic someday. Rook did that often.

There was a pack attached to the saddle. I unfastened the straps that held it in place and connected them to each other, turning it into a shoulder bag. I was already wearing my own bag over one shoulder, so I wore this one over the other, such that the two straps crossed over each other. It was easy to do because the straps were designed to be rearranged in this way. Our portable items weren’t so heavy, but carrying two bags at once made it quite a load.

“Wear the bow and arrows on your shoulder. Can you carry the spear too?”

I passed the dragon rider’s weapons to Carol. She put her arm through the bow without replying, put on the quiver, and gripped the spear in her hands.

“Let’s go.” I crouched down in front of Carol.

“You’re sure you can do this...?” Carol sounded concerned for me.

“Let’s get on with it.”

Carol wrapped her arms around my neck. She held the spear in both hands in front of me while her body weight rested on my back. It wasn’t too difficult for her to climb onto me with her one working leg.

I put my arms under Carol’s knees and rose to my feet like I was pulling her up.

The feeling of weight hit me.

She was light, but still heavier than a large rucksack. Fortunately, the ache in my back and pelvis must've been temporary nerve pain, because it was faint now.

Although it was all a heavy burden, I didn't feel as though my knees were about to give way beneath me.

I can handle this.

I tried saying it out loud. "I can handle this."

Saying the words gave me more confidence. It felt like I'd just stated the obvious. If it had been hopeless and I'd just been trying to convince myself, I would've felt my spirit break right then. I knew I could do it.

This should be fine.

I took one last look back at the dying dragon before we moved on.

II

We started walking at around four in the afternoon and continued for about two hours. Once it was around six, I decided we'd better rest for the night. I couldn't go on much longer.

"We'll sleep here."

I chose the nearest clear patch of ground and placed Carol down so I could begin preparing to make camp.

"Just wait there. I'll fetch some branches."

"Okay..."

Carol seemed a little nervous as I left her to find firewood.

With the load off my back, I began gathering dry branches. While I was at it, I climbed a tree and collected a few live branches that were as straight as possible.

When I got back to Carol, the relief on her face was obvious once she'd noticed me.

“What? You thought I might not come back?”

“No... It’s not that.”

Something else? Maybe she thought a wild animal might get me.

I put the wood together in a simple pile, then lit it to create a bonfire. Fortunately, my lighter still worked. Survival was a lot less work when it was possible to get a fire going this easily.

“Stick your leg out. I’ll make it feel better.”

“Okay...”

Carol obediently stretched out her leg.

When I removed the boot she was wearing, I found the ankle on her right foot was red and swollen—though not so badly that I couldn’t see where the joint was.

Carol groaned in pain. “Ugh.”

She’d been doing the same thing every time I accidentally knocked her right leg against a tree while we’d been walking.

This looks painful. Why’d it have to be her ankle?

Unlike horse-riding boots, kingeagle footwear made it possible to move the ankle freely to suit the rider’s sitting position. If only she’d been wearing long boots that restricted ankle movement, she wouldn’t have gotten injured like this.

I stripped the bark from some narrow, flexible branches and lined up three of them side by side before aligning them with the heel of her shoe.

The sole of Carol’s shoe was made from flexible, thin wood bent at a right angle around the heel and Achilles tendon regions.

I used my knife to make holes in the heel part to put string through, then tied the splint into the shoe. I put Carol’s foot back in the shoe and tied the laces. Next, I tore up some clothing I’d found in the dragon rider’s belongings and made a small bandage that I tied around her ankle and shin to hold the splint in place.

“That should do it... Does this hurt?”

I held Carol’s toes and tried to move her foot in circular movements. The splint worked—her ankle didn’t move.

“No, it doesn’t... That’s amazing.”

Carol seemed puzzled, like she couldn’t understand how this treatment had been so simple.

“Let’s eat,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

“He had bread in his belongings. We’ll have food for tonight at least.”

I passed Carol the provisions I’d taken from the dragon rider.

I was amazed he could carry bread with him while flying, but I was thankful to him now that I’d taken it. Sometimes a kingeagle’s rider would carry dried meat or something high in calories like beans, but bread was usually too bulky.

I passed a piece to Carol, but she just held it.

“What’s wrong? Can’t eat?”

“Um... Well, uh...” Carol looked a little embarrassed.

Ah... I think I get it. She’s holding back for my sake.

“Forget about me. I’m not even hungry.”

“Why not? Are you worried about what’ll happen?”

Huh...? Oh, that’s right. Some people can’t eat anything when they’re anxious.

“No. This might sound pathetic, but I completely lost my appetite after killing that guy.”

I’d never expected that killing someone would come as such a shock.

On our way here, I hadn’t been forming a plan, nor had I been wondering what the rest of our unit was doing. All I’d been able to think about was the dead man whose name I didn’t even know, the weight of the rock I’d used to kill him, his face—and what little had been left of it after I’d crushed it—and the feeling as I cut his ears. It all kept coming back to me.

Those thoughts had left my gut feeling heavy and robbed me of my appetite.

“Ah... Sorry. It’s my fault,” Carol said.

Your fault?

“How so?”

“Huh?”

“Why would it be your fault?”

Given her personality, it made sense to me that she’d see it that way, even though she was completely wrong.

“Because I crashed... Then I broke my ankle...”

“Yeah, but I crashed too,” I replied.

“But I broke my ankle. Now I’m slowing you down.”

“The ankle injury was just an accident. It’s not like I did anything smart while falling. In fact, I blacked out. It’s pure luck that I wasn’t as badly injured as you were when I reached the ground.”

For a moment, I remembered Stardust. It felt like a knife stabbing into my chest. Perhaps I was just being overly emotional, but I couldn’t help but imagine him angling himself so that his body would break my fall. The more time passed, the more vivid that mental image became.

“I was reckless. I thought the enemy couldn’t hurt us as long as we kept to a safe altitude. The only reason I broke away from the main company to attack their camp was because I thought they had no way to retaliate. I was so sure we’d be safe, I thought, ‘why not test out a new product and maybe sell it later once we’ve demonstrated its effect?’”

For some reason, the Kulati weren’t capable of taming kingeagles or plainrunners, much less training them. They couldn’t trust their Shanti slaves to control the creatures either. Since both birds were faster than horses, the slaves would use them to escape.

They could’ve held a hostage to prevent the slave from running away, but then the slave couldn’t be trusted to relay important orders, or to perform any

scouting crucial for an operation's success. As long as there was a risk they'd provide false information out of spite, they couldn't be trusted with such responsibility, and anything they said would be unreliable.

Despite our birds being so useful in battle, there were no recorded instances in history of the Kulati using them. There might've been exceptions—incidents minor enough to escape being recorded—but kingeagles and plainrunners weren't at all cost-effective for the enemy.

For that reason, I'd assumed we'd be safe because the enemy couldn't use kingeagles.

"It was my incompetence that got us into this situation. Things have been going so well for me lately that I started thinking I could do anything. But I can't. I underestimated this war more than anyone else."

I'd been itching to try out firebomb attacks in the field, thinking they might be a useful strategy in the future. If I could show that they were effective and versatile, then maybe I could get the big chieftains to use them on a wide scale. That could've put us at an advantage during the next war.

But it was never a risk I should've taken while escorting someone as important as Carol.

"You're wrong. The dragon would've attacked me even if you'd stayed by my side. Besides, no one could've guessed it would happen in the few minutes you were gone."

That was true enough. Still, from the enemy's perspective, splitting into two groups had created an opportunity for them to attack. They would've launched an assault sooner or later, even if we'd all stayed together, but in that case I would've attacked the dragon while it was chasing after Carol. I couldn't deny it.

"You gave me command...but when I was attacked, all I could think about was controlling Mountain Haze. I couldn't stay calm and give orders." Carol sounded as if she considered herself responsible for it all.

"I doubt anyone could've given out orders with that dragon attacking them."

I know I couldn't have.

Anyone carrying out complicated aerial maneuvers would be too busy to give orders, and the riders by her side were unlikely to have understood any orders she gave in that situation anyway.

“Maybe you should’ve fled by yourself, but then it could’ve attacked the rest of us instead.”

“But... If you’d gotten attacked, you would’ve done something,” Carol objected.

Like what?

“The only reason I could take down the dragon was because I was flying higher. Even if I’d still had the firebombs, I would’ve had to ascend before dropping them, giving it a chance to hit me as I slowed down. You made a reasonable choice. You let yourself be its target, and thanks to that, no one died.”

As awful as our situation was, no one had died because of it... So far, at least.

If anyone was to take responsibility, then it would be me, then Liao—he should’ve taken over my responsibilities before Mountain Haze got too tired. After him, it would be Her Majesty for coming up with the whole plan. The only things Carol could be blamed for were failing to flee, and for revealing her distinctive hair. The dragon rider must’ve become fixated on her after seeing it.

I hadn’t told her to hide it because I’d thought the sight would raise morale. That was my mistake.

“You don’t have to cover for me.”

Cover for you?

“You’re just thinking negatively because your foot’s injured. You’re coming up with twisted reasons to explain things that were just bad luck.”

“Maybe...”

“But forget that. Eat. Otherwise your wound won’t heal.”

Carol still hadn’t taken a bite from the bread.

“Won’t you eat anything, Yuri? I won’t insist if you think you’ll throw up,

but...”

“It’s not so bad that I’d throw up after eating.”

“Then you should eat something...I think.” Carol sounded concerned for me.

I guess she’s right.

“All right, I’ll try a little.”

“Okay.”

Carol broke her piece of bread apart and handed half to me.

I hadn’t expected her to give up her own food. My appetite was so poor that I didn’t mind the small amount, but I worried it’d leave her hungry.

“No, that’s yours.”

“It’s fine. I’m not hungry anyway,” she said.

That’s gotta be a lie.

But since I was the one who’d done all the moving around, she was naturally reluctant to eat more than me.

“Fine, I’ll take it.”

I took the bread from her and bit off a small piece.

“But why was there a dragon...?” Carol asked while taking a nibble of her food.

“No idea. Have you ever heard of dragons being used in wars against the Shanti?”

I thought I’d better ask in case there was a gap in my knowledge. As a master of ancient Shanish, Carol knew much more than I did about the history of Shanti kingdoms.

“Never seen it, never heard of it.”

So it really was a first.

“Okay...”

“What kind of creatures are they?” Carol asked. “I’ve heard of them, but I

never thought I'd actually see one for myself."

It wasn't surprising that Carol didn't know much about them. This world's dragons were a type of lizard found across the equivalent of northern Africa and the Middle East. They could fly, much like kingeagles, but their habitats were completely different—they preferred warm, dry environments.

To tame a dragon, someone would have to hand raise it from the moment it hatched. They were mostly reared in either the Korlan Dragon Empire or Entak Dragon Kingdom to be used as living weapons.

According to Ms. Ether, who knew much about historical languages, the Shanish word for "dragon" was a loan word that originated as a Totish word used in Ancient Nigroth. From that piece of information, I gathered that the Shanti had never coexisted with dragons.

For one thing, the nations populated by the Shanti had always been much farther north than the regions inhabited by dragons. As for the people of the Korlan Dragon Empire and Entak Dragon Kingdom, they practiced the religion of Kokorlism, making them more likely to fight against the crusaders than side with them. That left them no reason to encounter the Shanti.

But even in the Shiyalta Kingdom, there was a fairly famous historical book known as *Chronicles of the Dragon King*, written about a thousand years ago, about the first dragon emperor of the Korlan Dragon Empire, Ananta I. It was an entertaining tale of heroes and adventures that mixed history with fiction.

The book had a translation in contemporary Shanish, and anyone who read it would at least be familiar with dragons as a sort of fairytale creature. It was the sort of book that anyone with an interest in exotic foreign literature was likely to have read.

To put it another way, that's all dragons were to the Shanti—exotic creatures from a faraway land. I knew a lot about their nature because Ms. Ether had been willing to share her knowledge with me, but they were all too unfamiliar to Carol.

There's no way I'm gonna sleep tonight. We might as well chat about something.

“There are two types of animals: those that give off heat and maintain a constant temperature, and those whose temperature is determined by their surroundings.”

I threw a stick into the fire and took a bite out of my bread.

“Creatures that don’t produce heat need less food as a result. The downside is that the temperature of their surroundings has a major influence on their behavior. They might be lively in the summer, but not in the winter. They might be able to move just fine during the day, but barely at night. It’s a weakness of theirs, but the decreased need for food is an advantage that more than compensates for it in the natural world. They’ll still be able to survive without moving at night if they only need to hunt a tenth as often as other living creatures.”

“That makes sense...” Carol muttered. “Oh, you mean dragons are like that?”

“Right. Take a horse, for example—they have no trouble traveling from the warm southern regions up to the cold north. Dragons can’t do that. They shouldn’t be able to tolerate anywhere that’s this cold.”

Cold-blooded animals did give off a little body heat because their muscles working would always generate some, similar to how a human got hot after intense exercise. That meant there was a possibility of them flying to the north. The working of their muscles during flight would generate heat that was transmitted to their blood and then the rest of their body, but there was no way they could adapt to this climate. This northern region was so radically different from their natural habitat that they’d never be able to remain active for a long stretch of time spent here.

For example, if their body grew cold on a morning where the sun’s rays didn’t break through the clouds, how would they ever recover?

In the southern regions where they lived, they could regain their body heat by climbing onto a rock and waiting for the sun to heat them up. That wouldn’t work here, though. I was no expert on reptiles, but I knew that this was a tough environment for them.

“So that’s why it’s never happened before... But they brought a dragon this time,” Carol said.

“It must’ve taken a lot of effort. For example, at night they probably had to put the dragon in the middle of the camp and keep bonfires burning around it to keep its temperature up.”

That kind of VIP treatment would come at a high cost, but it was the only solution I could think of. If there was an easier way, they would’ve brought dragons to fight against us at least once or twice in the past.

“But did they only bring one?” Carol asked.

“Probably. If they had two, they would’ve used both at once... The observation unit was casually flying around in the sky after we crashed. The enemy would’ve sent a second dragon if they’d had one in reserve.”

I could imagine that others might’ve died during the journey here, or they might’ve gotten too sick to move...but speculating too much was a waste of time.

I picked up another dry branch and threw it into the bonfire.

Thinking more about it, I realized that the dragon I’d fought probably hadn’t been in good health. Even so, it hadn’t had any trouble scattering our kingeagles.

“Yeah...” Carol muttered.

“Our kingeagles drove them off last time. Maybe they brought a dragon so it could knock our kingeagles out of the sky, or maybe it was just to show their soldiers that they had a flying creature of their own, for the sake of morale... In any case, it was extremely bad luck for us.”

If there’d been any reports of a dragon, I would’ve gotten word of it through Liao. The enemy must’ve been doing everything to keep its existence hidden and ready for a surprise attack during the battle.

“But at least you took it down. Now it won’t cause panic for our side’s soldiers.”

That’s some positive thinking right there. But yeah, it’s one way to look at it.

“It’s hard to say whether it mattered since we lost the battle anyway. Though if we hadn’t distracted it, it would’ve aided the Kulati forces and our side

might've suffered even heavier losses," I replied.

I was trying to console myself. Whatever good we'd done, none of it had been worth putting Carol's life in so much danger. I needed whatever consolation I could get in this situation, though. It would all be over if my spirit broke.

"But I'm glad you came for me even after I crashed." Carol seemed to relax a little, as if she was remembering the moment I'd appeared.

She'd been in a life or death situation. It must've been a huge relief when I'd appeared.

"I just figured you'd get lonely if I didn't get there quickly."

If I'd taken just a little longer, Carol might've driven her dagger into her neck to kill herself. I'd barely made it in the nick of time.

"Yeah... I knew there was a chance you'd come save me. I'd survived, so I figured there was no way you wouldn't have..."

"I'd been praying you were safe the whole time," I said.

"Really...? You worried about me that much?"

"No, I was worried about *me*. My biggest fear was that I might have to kill you as an act of mercy. I thought I might find you barely breathing with a cracked skull or something. In my mind, that was the worst thing that could possibly happen. Compared to that, we're in paradise right now."

I meant it. If it had come to that, I might've suffered a mental breakdown that left me unable to even run. Being able to sit here and have this conversation felt like a miracle in itself.

"That's a bit... Yeah, I'm glad that didn't happen. It would've been pretty traumatic for you."

"I'd be more than traumatized. I'd end up bawling so hard I wouldn't even be able to stand up for about a day."

Carol's jaw dropped in shock. "Huh?"

"What?"

"N-Nothing. I just can't imagine you acting like that..."

What kind of person does she think I am?

“If I wasn’t going to get upset over you being killed or injured, I wouldn’t have come to save you in the first place, would I?”

“Well... I guess not.” Carol actually looked a little happy.

I wondered how I’d act if it was Dolla I was rescuing. *“Got injured? Man, that sucks. Don’t give up, though. A guy like you will heal up in a day, I know it. Anyway, I’m going on ahead.”* Like that, maybe? No, I wouldn’t be that heartless. Then again, even if I abandoned him here, he’d probably show up back home a year later.

“Let’s get some sleep. We’ll have to get moving again early tomorrow morning.”

“Okay...”

“There’s nothing to lie on, but...you’ll be more comfortable if you wrap yourself in this.”

I took some oil paper out of my bag. It was thick, durable paper coated in wax and a mixture of oils. There was an opening in it that made it like a poncho.

I’d been selling these as raincoats. The biggest flaw was that anyone who touched it got their hands greasy. Since they were so lightweight and compact, I’d used some of our funding to give one to every member of the unit. I had one that Liao had dropped for me, plus mine and Carol’s, giving us three in total.

I’d assumed people would wear them over packs carried on their back, so they were all a little oversized.

The neck part contained an opening just like ordinary clothing, and there were buttons for closing it up. It wasn’t designed to be slept in, but we had a spare in case we tore one.

I’d slept wearing one before and found that the airtight material was a fairly good insulator. Still, this wasn’t like a sleeping bag with cotton filling—the user had to remain appropriately dressed for the season.

Carol accepted the oil paper poncho.

“You’re not going to sleep?” she asked.

“I’ve got something to do first. I’ll sleep after.”

I wasn’t lying to her, but I also felt like I wouldn’t be able to sleep.

Killing Stardust and then the dragon rider must’ve left me too agitated to be sleepy at all, even though I should’ve been exhausted. My head was far from clear, though, and pointless thoughts kept running through my mind. They were anguished musings that never quite went away, and dulled my thinking like I was in mourning.

“All right... I’ll go to sleep first then,” Carol said.

“Okay.”

That’ll be best for us both.

Carol simply had to let me carry her again tomorrow, but the weight of a person that was awake felt less than the weight of a sleeping person. I’d need her to stay alert during the day. Besides, some good sleep would help her ankle heal faster.

“Yuri.”

I’d thought she’d fallen asleep the moment she’d wrapped herself in the poncho, but then she called to me.

“Hm?”

“Thanks for today. You really saved me.”

Haven’t we said that already?

“You don’t have to thank me. I was doing what I wanted.”

“Heh heh.” Carol laughed like she couldn’t stop herself.

“What’s so funny?”

“Just feeling touched by your kindness... Though I have trouble understanding you.”

I took two lives today, and now she’s telling me I’m kind. I’m having trouble understanding it too.

“Just go to sleep.”

Carol did as she was told, closing her eyes and curling up a little. Fatigue must've gotten to her, because she was sound asleep ten minutes later.



My eyes snapped open and I realized I'd been sleeping. I'd drifted off while leaning against our luggage, posed like someone falling asleep in class.

I looked around and realized I'd let the bonfire go out.

"Yuri... Don't tell me you didn't sleep?"

Carol was already awake.

I realized that the rustling sound of her moving around in the poncho must've woken me up.

It felt like things were happening in completely the wrong order. Obviously, I had been sleeping, but Carol had gotten the impression that I'd been awake the whole time. I'd slept in such a weird spot.

"No... I heard you and woke up. I must've fallen asleep at some point."



I wondered how many hours I'd spent sleeping. I couldn't tell. I took out my watch from my inside pocket and opened the cover to check the time.

It was around seven in the morning. The watch didn't need winding because I'd done it the night before, but just to be sure, I turned the crown until the spring was fully wound. If the watch ever stopped, I'd need some way to correct the time.

"Are you okay?" Carol asked while studying my face out of concern.

I'd slept sitting up and woken up at the same time as her, so it must've looked like I hadn't slept at all.

I put my watch back in my pocket.

"I'm good. Now let's give this a try."

I handed Carol a wooden staff.

It was a sturdy wooden rod with a smaller rod attached to one end. It wasn't like a crutch that she could put under her shoulder; it was more like a walking stick with a handle that she'd be able to hold on to.

"A staff...? You can make things like this too?"

"I could only make one. It'll be nice to have when you want to get around a little."

There were certain things people liked to do without others watching—members of the opposite sex in particular. This would help her walk a little and make our journey less stressful.

I'd definitely want something like it if I were in her shoes.

"Thanks. It's useful, but this staff was..."

"In a forest like this, that thing was literally useless baggage. This is for the best."

We'd been carrying the spear shaft Liao had dropped—a round and fairly long wooden rod that was ideal for the staff.

Although it was too long to be of any use in this forest, it had been a powerful weapon. I'd considered keeping it just in case we ever needed it, but the

experience the day before had taught me that a shorter spear was more useful. The spear had originally been just under two meters, making it hard to pass between trees while holding it horizontally. Even when held vertically, it tended to bump into the branches overhead. It was far too difficult to carry it while I had Carol on my back. The weapon wasn't worth sacrificing our speed for.

I didn't have any tools with me for carving random branches into the right shape, so I'd cut the shaft in two. Now it was just a little over a meter long, but I'd be able to carry it without it getting caught on the trees.

"All right. Thanks. I'll make good use of it," Carol said.

"And I buried your armor last night too."

"You did? Sorry for not helping."

"I don't mind."

I'd mostly done it to take my mind off things.

"Anyway, let's have breakfast. Or do you need to take a leak first?"

"A...leak?!"

Carol's face turned red as if I'd said something vulgar. Seeing her react that way made me feel embarrassed too.

"If you don't like me saying 'leak,' should I be more direct about it?"

"No, shut up."

I can't keep quiet about these things. I get that she's embarrassed, but...

"If this embarrasses you, what'll happen if you need to go while I'm carrying you? I'll be annoyed if you wet yourself on my back."

"Ugh..." Carol looked down at the ground, red-faced.

"Well, you've got your staff. If you wanna go, then go. Oh, but don't go that way. I set a trap." I pointed to the place where I'd set it the night before.

"Ugh... F-Fine..." Carol's voice was barely audible. "I'll go."

Carol got to her feet using the staff, then used it to support herself as she hobbled away.

III

A lone girl walked across the battlefield. Her hair rippled in the wind as she walked. Beneath it were two round ears.

Angelica Sacramenta, next in line to the throne of the Tyrelme Holy Empire, was attending the battle that day. Her post, however, was in the rear guard's camp far from the fighting.

It was Angelica's responsibility to defend the camp while commanding a force of several hundred. Defending the rear guard sounded like an important task, but it was actually an easygoing role that left her with nothing to do.

"Phew..."

She'd declared her force elite and made her men train each day, but she'd been forced to give her soldiers a defensive role that she could only describe as boring. They were defending the camp in name only. It was morning, but already they'd run out of tasks.

That was unsurprising, because the rear guard wasn't truly using this as their main camp—that was already being dismantled.

In the battle three days earlier, the crusade force that Angelica belonged to had clashed with the long-eared forces.

Those people—the others—were referred to as demons or devils within the sphere of Yeesusdom, but Angelica stuck to what her father had taught her and insisted on calling them long-eareds.

With the long-eared forces already defeated, the crusader army was advancing. The advance was taking place at full speed, so they could eliminate as many of the fleeing soldiers as possible in the process. In the meantime, any mercenaries who'd survived the battle were busy pillaging the surrounding settlements. It all meant that the main camp needed moving quickly.

Each nation had mobilized a provisions company to carry a simple tent for their generals and enough food for each day. In other words, as their armies were marching far ahead, each nation was dismantling the camp they'd put together for the sake of the battle they'd already won.

Naturally, any violent men who prided themselves on their strength and were eager for a good fight had left the camp long ago. There wasn't much left here to defend.

Angelica hadn't been given an opportunity to take part in the battle. She'd been left to sit here, idle after the defensive duties had been forced on her.

Despite being here for the war, she wouldn't share in the spoils of pillaging because she hadn't taken part in the fighting. If there was any glory to be gained, it was a distant light that Angelica and her forces could never reach.

"Now follow me as my attendant. I'll be going to look at the Papal State's camp again today."

"Yes, Lady Ange!" The knight kneeled before her.

Those who'd looked down on Angelica for being a woman or had tried to assault her when she was unguarded were already gone. Any such people who still remained were no threat because they were badly wounded enough to be sent to the rear. It *almost* felt safe for her to walk around alone now, but she wouldn't take that risk.

Angelica's elder brother, Alfred Sacramenta, was trying to assassinate her.

He'd attempted to poison her more than once. It meant she needed an escort at all times.

Angelica had been doted on by her father, the former emperor Lenizicht Sacramenta. Unlike her brothers, who'd been raised back when he was too busy with royal duties to pay them any attention, she'd been educated by the emperor himself.

But Lenizicht had died suddenly in the midst of a crusade. The enemy had launched a suicide attack atop their giant eagles, ultimately slaying him with little warning.

As a result of the tumultuous succession process that followed her father's death, three of Angelica's four brothers had died, leaving only Alfred. In the end, he was the one who'd been placed on the throne.

It had originally been thought that Alfred had the weakest claim to the throne

of all her brothers. When Lenizicht died, he'd been just a youngster of eighteen years. A boy of that age was considered far too young to handle the heavy burden of royal responsibility. His two older brothers, however, aged thirty-one and twenty-seven, had been seen as likely candidates.

Those two brothers had already been given vast territories that produced great sums in the form of taxes and were home to the sizable orders of knights they commanded. It was Alfred who'd been temporarily made the ruler of the territory that had been managed by the former emperor. As he established himself as the ruler of the region, he'd ended up inevitably joining the battle for succession. In some ways, he'd been given an advantage over his two brothers.

Seven years after the emperor's death, the eldest son was assassinated as a result of the fierce succession battle that took place between him and the second-eldest son. As a rule, it wasn't acceptable for a potential successor to the throne to kill a rival in the period when there was no emperor. Instead, they were supposed to allow the most wise and powerful of the local rulers to decide who was best suited for the role.

Without such a rule, succession would always turn into a violent internal conflict that overshadowed the decision-making process of the prince electors. Those intent on claiming the throne would normally make every effort to win the prince electors' approval, so if they instead turned their attention to fighting each other, that would go against the prince electors' interests.

General opinion following the assassination was that the second-eldest son had been responsible for his brother's death, thus disqualifying him as a successor. Although there was no proof that it *had* been an assassination, the eldest son's guards had mounted a retaliatory attack on the second eldest's territory soon after, and when those guards died honorably in the attempt, public opinion had turned against the second-eldest son.

It was then that Alfred had made his move and reached out to the prince electors.

Either he'd felt that he'd gained the experience he'd lacked through the past seven years of strife, or the steady income he'd made collecting taxes as a temporary local ruler had given him the financial power needed to launch a

succession bid.

In the end, Alfred avoided being assassinated by the second brother, claimed the royal territory as his own, and created massive debts for himself—a result of the bribes he'd offered the prince electors to secure himself the votes he needed. In the process, Alfred had eroded the royal family's fortune. If the royal family could be considered a united group, then this amounted to a betrayal.

Angelica was, of course, outraged, but from Alfred's point of view, it had been a necessary measure to save his own life. If he'd allowed the second son to become emperor, his own assassination would've been inevitable.

Alfred assassinated the second brother soon after his own coronation, and then the fourth-eldest brother too. He'd made repeated attempts on Angelica's life as well, but so far she'd managed to avoid harm.

At the height of the ten-year battle for succession, Angelica had been given a home tutor who, despite being young, was already a famous scholar. Angelica had been able to learn much about the world. Rather than allowing others to manage her territory for her, she'd become determined to use her knowledge to manage the lands under her rulership.

As a result, despite being only eighteen years old, Angelica's hold on her domain had become so strong that not even Alfred could take it from her after he'd become emperor.

She had no fear of being poisoned within her own castle because she was aware of everything that happened within its walls. Whenever a band of assassins infiltrated her territory, she knew immediately. This was what had allowed Angelica to just barely protect her own life.

"Hmm..."

Angelica sat on a crude chair beneath the blue sky and scratched her neck.

Before her lay a vast patch of ash and charred ruins. Three days prior, this had been the site of a massive blaze that burned through an entire group of tents.

This spot wasn't within a town or a castle. When everything else was taken away, it would be an empty field, so no one had cared to clean up these burned remains. In as little as a month's time, there'd be nothing left but a great black

scorch mark in the field's center.

At any rate, the location meant little to the Tyrelme Holy Empire because the camp here had belonged to the Catholica Papal State.

But of course, they were allies fighting side by side on the same battlefield, so what happened to one group could affect the others. On the other hand, now that they'd won the decisive battle, there was no chance that her own empire would suffer a similar attack.

Still, Angelica couldn't stop wondering how the enemy had done so much damage.

Did they use some kind of beast fat? Or maybe there was something they added to olive oil to make it more flammable?

But no—oil wasn't so easily ignited. There were boiling oils that were poured over enemy soldiers when defending a castle, and arrows that could be ignited before they were fired, but oil was never used like this on the battlefield.

Still, a fire attack could be particularly significant in war. They could sometimes be employed on the ground—in a dry field, for example—but oil couldn't be spread across a field in order to burn it later.

Some weapons came to mind, like explosive gunpowder balls known as grenades. Those were made by adding a fuse to a container filled with gunpowder and scrap iron. Such weapons had some practical use, but their many drawbacks made them surprisingly difficult to use effectively.

Since they were merely balls full of gunpowder, they obviously had to be thrown at the enemy as soon as the fuse was lit. This presented a problem because bows, crossbows, and guns all had longer range than a grenade thrown by hand. There was a real risk of the user being shot and dropping the grenade.

Another issue was that it might explode in midair if the fuse was too short. Holding on to it for longer when throwing it a shorter distance created a risk of it exploding in the user's hand. If, however, the fuse was too long, then someone with exceptional courage in the enemy camp might pick it up and throw it back.

It certainly was a powerful type of weapon, but there were too many flaws.

The weapon used by the long-eareds might have been something of a similar nature, but witnesses to the attack all said that the enemy had dropped multiple items from the air that caused the blaze to spread rapidly. That behavior didn't fit with grenades. No one had mentioned each item exploding loudly.

After a long-eared's eagle had dropped something on the Papal State's storage pile, the fire had spread to the barrels of gunpowder piled up there. Those were the likely cause of the explosion that followed.

There had been a similar attack on a joint storage pile belonging to the Peninsula Kingdom and Flushia, but the damage was minimal, presumably because it hadn't been storing any gunpowder.

Gunpowder got damp easily. Storing it outside in unsheltered barrels—regardless of how well waterproofed those barrels were—was the level of stupidity Angelica had come to expect from the Papal State.

In any case, if the enemy had used large gunpowder balls, those wouldn't have simply burst into flames. An explosion would have come first; the blaze second.

They had to have dropped something highly flammable. It didn't quite fit the witness reports, but one possibility was that they'd dropped flaming torches designed to scatter apart in midair.

"Well? What do you lot think?" Angelica asked the people around her without turning to look at any of them.

She wasn't expecting a full explanation. She just wanted to hear someone else's opinion.

One of the knights raised his hand. "Lady Angelica."

Angelica glared at the knight. "Ahem?"

"Oh..."

"I've told you time and time again to call me Ange. How many times do I have to say it?"

The knight quickly corrected himself. "S-Sorry...Lady Ange."

It was a constant source of annoyance. Angelica wondered whether they'd ever call her by that name. Even her own soldiers tended to forget after eight years of service to her.

Angelica wasn't trying to get her subordinates to call her Ange for the sake of creating a warm and friendly environment; she simply hated the cutesy sound of the name "Angelica."

Even her father, Lenizicht, had called her Ange, and she'd grown fond of the name. It was shorter and easier to say, and it felt sharp and stern in her opinion. "Angelica" felt like such a weak and feminine name.

Hence, she was asking them to call her "Ange" as if "Angelica" wasn't her name anymore. It wasn't just a ridiculous demand for the soldiers to call their local ruler and master by a pet name. No one should've hesitated to call her Ange.

Naturally, since it wasn't a casual nickname, they were still expected to show respect by calling her "Lady" or "Princess" at the same time.

Regardless, her soldiers and servants all seemed to think of it like a nickname. They remained reluctant to call her "Lady Ange" or "Princess Ange." Whenever she wasn't around, they'd revert back to calling her by her former name, and then they'd slip up while in her presence.

Angelica decided to forgive him for misspeaking. "Forget it. Just tell me."

"It occurred to me while I was drinking yesterday that concentrated spirits could have been used."

"Oh," Angelica said before she could stop herself.

That was a possibility.

Angelica hadn't developed a taste for alcohol yet, but she knew that distilled drinks with a sharp odor could be ignited by an open flame.

Yes, maybe that's what they used. She felt it was likely.

"Well done. Yes, that's quite possible."

"Indeed, Your Highness."

“All right. I’ll begin looking into that as soon as we get back.”

She’d barely finished speaking before she began to have some doubts.

Unlike oil, the content of a concentrated spirit was still more than half water. She’d seen alcohol burn when poured onto roasted dishes before, but she found it hard to imagine it igniting properly after being thrown in the form of a bottle with a lit fuse.

“By the way... Was there any news about the fleeing long-eared being caught?”

The reply was given by another knight. “No, and the lizard rider hasn’t returned either.”

One of the eagle-riding long-eareds responsible for the fire attack had been brought down by a dragon rider hired specifically for this war.

Dragon riders normally fought for the forces of Kokorlism, which was hostile toward Yeesusism. Even dragons themselves were despised creatures within the sphere of Yeesusdom. But once in a great while, a rider could be found in the nations of Yeesusdom.

The dragon rider that had come this time had once fought on the losing side during a war for succession to the throne in the Entak Dragon Kingdom, making him an exile of sorts. Apparently, he’d been making a living by turning his dragon into an attraction in the Peninsula Kingdom, but now he’d come to offer his services farther north after receiving a large payment from the Papal State.

That was all well and good, but what mattered were the two eagles he’d taken down. One of the long-eared riders had been found dead. The other had run and was being pursued.

One thing that Angelica struggled to understand was why the dragon rider had never come back. The stories said that he was chasing after the other long-eared in hopes of a reward. To her, however, that made no sense. He could certainly make himself a little extra cash by retrieving their ears, but he was already being paid handsomely for his service as a dragon rider. In fact, he’d already performed so well that the Papal State would be ready to pay him whatever he was owed. The money he’d get as a reward for bringing back an

ear or two would be small change in comparison. The question, then, was why he'd forget about such a large sum and instead go chasing after an armed long-eared through the forest for the sake of a few pennies.

It was somewhat plausible if one assumed that the other long-eared was injured from the crash and would be easy to catch and kill, but the dragon rider had been gone three days already.

At any rate, she believed that the remaining long-eared was part of the operation that had created the huge scorch mark before her. If he was captured and questioned, it might even lead to the development of a new weapon.

"Hm... I want to talk to whoever's handling the search for the long-eared. Who is it and where are they?"

A knight responsible for keeping in contact with the other camps raised his hand. "I know the answer. I can lead you to him."

Once Angelica had been guided to the site by the soldier, she found a commotion underway. Several people—about a group of ten—had arrived before her, and something strange was going on.

Angelica stood at the front of her party and addressed the crowd. "I'm Angelica Sacramenta of the Tyrelme Holy Empire's imperial family. What's going on here?"

These people appeared to be all commoners. They cowered as she spoke, and none of them dared to respond.

"Forget it! Just let me through!" she yelled.

The commoners scattered in all directions.

Now that they were out of the way, she found a lone knight lying on a sheet placed on the ground. The injury to his right leg was noticeable at a glance. There was a large wound in the bottom of his foot, as if he'd stood on a blade.

His boot hadn't been removed, but so much blood was flowing from it that even his pants were stained red. It shouldn't have been a fatal wound, but there was no one around to treat it. The best thing was to bind the leg at the knee, and indeed it was bound, but it must have been done too poorly to apply much

pressure. Angelica felt like telling the commoners that her own shoelaces had been tied tighter.

Still, the sight of this knight didn't perturb Angelica at all. As awful as the attempts at treatment were, this wasn't uncommon. At that very moment, people were exhausted and dying back at her own camp.

It was strange, however, to see someone with fresh wounds when the battle had happened three days prior.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Uh, ugh..."

His gaze was vacant. It was obvious that he'd lost too much blood.

"Tend to him," Angelica instructed her own subordinates.

Three of them quickly stepped forward and began tearing the man's pants. They put the strips of torn fabric behind his knee. Then, with several layers of cloth in place, they tied it with a sturdy rope. Next, they began removing his boot.

"Give me a brief summary of what happened," Angelica ordered the first commoner who met her gaze.

"Uh, **** fell in hole ****... Wi' blades in..."

The commoner spoke in such an awful countryside dialect that Angelica couldn't make out more than half of what he'd said.

Even commoners could be well-spoken if they owned their own farm, but there were many serfs who couldn't so much as put a valid sentence together. Unlike landowners, such people spent their whole lives doing nothing but carrying out the simplest of labor. It meant they struggled when ordered to carry out any task requiring initiative. In other words, they were so useless they could barely talk. In the eyes of highly educated nobles such as Angelica, they were like a lower life-form.

But there were exceptions, of course. Angelica knew that some were capable of displaying considerable talent.

However, these were men chosen for the battlefield. It was common sense to

dispatch those whose death would be no great loss. Unless a good number of hot-blooded youngsters stepped forward to volunteer, the soldiers conscripted from farmlands were generally the most useless people around.

It had probably been the bleeding knight who'd instructed them to make his tourniquet, but "bind it tight to stop the bleeding" probably hadn't been a clear enough instruction for them, so their attempts hadn't been much use.

Maybe he'll still live, but he got unlucky either way, Angelica thought.

"An' den..."

"That's enough."

The commoner fell silent. He hung his head sadly.

Angelica felt a pang of guilt. *That was harsh of me.*

"Call for someone with a general's rank. They'll come if you say someone from a member of foreign rulership is here."



"If our soldiers have been rude to you, I apologize."

When a high-ranking officer later appeared, it was clear from his clothing that he was a noble. His abdomen was large and unsightly.

Perhaps he hadn't seen many women on the battlefield—or at least none who'd been in one piece—because his eyes were full of lust as he looked at Angelica.

"Sorry, but what camp are you from?" he asked.

What camp? Can't you see the crest sewn into my cloak? Angelica kept those thoughts to herself.

The crest on her cloak was, of course, one of the most well-known family crests in Yeesusdom. Any noble who didn't recognize it had to be completely uneducated.

"I'm Angelica Sacramenta. A member of the Tyrelme Holy Empire's imperial family."

"Oh ho," the mature man said as he stroked his beard. But that was all—he

said nothing else.

It was customary to introduce oneself before asking someone to identify themselves, or to at least follow suit after asking first. In addition, if the person being asked was imperial, then it was customary to apologize for being so rude.

When the man said nothing, Angelica was forced to ask him directly. “Well? Why don’t you tell me what sort of position you hold?”

This is why I hate everyone from the Papal State.

Serving a sacred nation seemed to go to their heads. They always looked down on foreigners, and even the lowest of nobles seemed to think that they held greater esteem than the rulers of other nations.

Tyrelme’s imperial family could be traced back to its founder—a holy emperor of the Holy Empire. That should’ve made Angelica worthy of great respect, but the people of the Papal State didn’t view her family members with the reverence they deserved. Instead, they liked to bring up two instances in which commoners had married into Tyrelme’s imperial family.

“I’m Count Felmut Carzil, and the handling of this incident is under my command. I’m the consul of Malt City and also the commander of a battalion of the Volunteer Knight Order.”

Those were lofty titles.

The Papal State belonged to clergymen, led by a pope who was the state’s sovereign. Collecting taxes and maintaining order were tasks that fell outside of the clergy’s sphere, though. The clergy couldn’t possibly go around demanding money while wearing their vestments and claiming to be serving God, nor could they wield weapons. Instead, they appointed people known as consuls who acted as local rulers and administered regions on the clergy’s behalf.

Angelica had learned about this system through reading books. The role of consul was normally given to a relative of a clergy member, or to someone who’d paid large bribes to a high-ranking clergyman in exchange for the appointment.

The Volunteer Knight Order had existed since the days of the Xurxes Holy Empire, but even though it called itself an order, it was really no more than a

private army under the control of local rulers. Likewise, this man called himself a count, but it merely meant that he was the noble assigned the task of managing a city known as Malt, so that city was his county.

“I’d like to know whether this knight was pursuing the fleeing long-eared.”

“Indeed. He was, but he shamed himself by getting injured and letting them escape.”

So I’m in the right place after all.

Either he’d fallen into a trap set by the long-eared, or one set by a local hunter intended for wild beasts. In either case, Angelica would have to wait until the knight’s condition was stable before she could ask him for details.

“And what became of the dragon rider?”

“He never came back.”

Then they’ve made no progress at all. Incredible.

“And what happened to the long-eared’s body?” Angelica asked as if in passing.

“It’s lying in the tent.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Angelica found that hard to believe. *Why would it be in a tent?*

A long-eared who’d caused such damage would normally have their corpse crucified and left on display, as per the Papal State’s customs. Angelica had asked under the assumption that it had already been crucified. She would’ve checked herself, but she didn’t enjoy watching executions.

“I mean exactly what I say,” the man replied with a slight sneer.

Something’s not right here.

“Why wasn’t it crucified? Don’t your people always do that?”

The long-eared fools who’d killed Angelica’s father, Lenizicht, had been crucified in that way and left until their bodies had rotted.

Lenizicht had said, “See that proper respect is paid to whoever kills me on the

battlefield,” so his attendants hadn’t wanted to defile their bodies. Unfortunately, however, the Papal State had interfered to ensure they were put up on display.

Although the Papal State had been the ones responsible for leaving their tents and resources vulnerable to attack, it didn’t make any sense that the long-eared hadn’t been crucified after destroying so many of them.

“Oh. The face is unrecognizable. When he fell, his face...” The man clenched his fist and then gestured as if bashing his own face. “He must’ve smacked his face hard against a rock. There’s no point in putting the body out on display now that he isn’t recognizable.”

Angelica couldn’t understand the logic behind that, but she still chose to accept it. She’d never taken any pleasure in seeing anyone shamed through the crucifixion of their corpse, so the practice had never made sense to her in the first place.

She had, however, often seen corpses on display with ruined faces. It wasn’t something she knew from the battlefield, but rather from large cities where the local guards had failed to catch a notorious criminal after posting up images of their likeness. To spare themselves embarrassment, they would take a corpse and damage the face before claiming it was the captured criminal. If a disfigured, unrecognizable long-eared was put on display, it might have been a similar trick.

“Mm?” *Hold on a minute*, Angelica thought. “Sorry to ask the obvious, but the body *did* have long ears, didn’t it?”

“They’d been cut off, but the creature was a devil. So, yes, obviously they were long.”

Fool. Angelica wanted to say the word aloud, but she held back.

“The right ear might’ve been cut off, but it should’ve still had its left one.”

Rather than bringing back the enemy’s head, people could collect the pointed right ears. Mercenaries often had a contract stating how much money they’d be paid for each ear, and several of the camps had similar reward schemes in place.

Only the right ear was worth money, however. Left ears were always worthless—otherwise there'd be people cutting off both ears and getting paid twice.

"Hmm, I wonder what happened..." the man said.

Didn't you look into that? If both ears were gone and the face destroyed, how can you tell it's not a human corpse?

"Let me see the body," she said.

"Ah..." The man frowned. He reacted like a merchant asked to show his ledger. There was no chance that he was colluding with the enemy. More likely, he hated to have others sticking their nose into his business. "The wounds are horrific. I couldn't show it to a woman."

Now he was making up a poor excuse.

"That's no reason to refuse me. Every camp is awash with the dead and wounded right now. I haven't been walking around with my eyes closed."

"It's a waste of time to look at it now. The body's in an awful state."

Now he was whining about it.

"If you refuse to show me, then in my official capacity as—"

Angelica didn't manage to get any further before hearing the distinctive sound of something scraping against a metal plate. Her anger must've distracted her from noticing until it had gotten near. She turned to face the source.

"Greetings, Princess Angelica," a young man of slender build said.

He was wearing a dark purple robe over clothing which was beautifully embroidered with golden thread. The scraping metal plates she'd heard were from the heavily armored volunteer knight accompanying him. The young man wasn't wearing armor himself, but he wore a saber-like sword at his waist. Although Angelica only caught a glimpse of it, she noticed that the grip and scabbard were extravagantly designed.

Like many who'd never had to worry about money, even his clothes were majestic.

Her father, Lenizicht, had taught her that gold was a soft and heavy metal that shouldn't be worn to the battlefield for many reasons—it would only be a burden. As beautiful as his attire looked, Angelica didn't feel a shred of envy.

“Lord Palazzo. It's been some time.”

Angelica made sure to greet him politely. This knight, named Epitaph Palazzo, was the pope's nephew. For some reason, he'd chosen a career as a knight over a position within the clergy. He'd been chosen as the Volunteer Knight Order's war minister during this crusade.

When a force united by a crusade or faith in Yeesusism was mobilized, the pope himself would appoint a war minister responsible for the Catholica Papal State's army. In other words, this man was the supreme commander of the Papal State's armed forces.

Given that her foolish brother Alfred had recently ascended to the throne, he'd been given the honor of acting as inspector general to the entire army. However, head of the Papal State's army was a lofty position that gave Epitaph more authority than the head of any foreign state.

Angelica had met this man during the previous war council. It was there that Angelica had presented her plan to use a new weapon to take the fortress, and Epitaph had agreed to put it into practice.

The new weapon needed to be assembled on-site, so it wouldn't be complete for another week or so. Now that the fortress was encircled, Angelica had to wait for the work to be completed, so she'd been able to visit the site of the fire in the meantime.

“So what brings you here today?” Epitaph asked, smiling without a hint of malice.

His face was so well-proportioned that his gesture almost made Angelica's heart skip a beat.

“Um... I'm looking into the fire incident. Based on what Count Felmut has told me, I believe there's something suspicious about the long-eared's remains.”

“Oh ho, I see. And now you want to investigate further?”

“Did you hear us speaking?” Angelica asked in response.

“Indeed. Forgive me.”

He was likely asking to be pardoned for eavesdropping.

“Oh, not at all. I should apologize for speaking too loudly.”

“So now you’d like to see the remains of the fiend?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Well then, Count Felmut, show her the way.”

“Uh...?” Felmut stuttered.

“I said show her the way. I’d like to see it too.”

“B-But... It’s a ghastly sight...”

This again? Angelica felt like sighing.

“I don’t mind,” Epitaph said. “And Lady Angelica has said she doesn’t mind either.”

“Ah... If there’s something you’d like to check, I could do it myself.”

“Must I repeat myself?”

Epitaph was still smiling slightly, but Felmut was frozen stiff.

“V-Very well... I’ll guide you. This way...”

Great.

Naturally, Felmut wasn’t going to try whining now that he had orders from a higher-up.

The tent that Angelica was led to wasn’t even a minute’s walk away.

The stench of blood hit her once it was opened. She put her handkerchief to her nose as she stepped inside.

The corpse was lying on its back without a cloth covering it. The face was indeed destroyed beyond recognition. As Felmut had said, it wasn’t a pleasant sight.

“Hmm...” Epitaph studied the corpse closely.

Angelica also inspected the corpse lying on the table.

Both ears were indeed damaged. The point of the left ear was gone, perhaps due to an impact with a sharp rock. The clothing, however—a fine set of armor—was clearly made in a long-eared nation. Eagle riders occupied a higher class than ordinary knights, so that much was expected, but this armor was exceptional.

“I don’t think there’s any way to tell,” Angelica said.

She’d wondered whether the corpse possibly belonged to the dragon rider rather than an eagle rider, but there was no way to be sure. If the eagle rider really *had* killed the dragon rider, then disguised the corpse in new clothes, it could be concealing further evidence.

“Oh...? You weren’t aware?” Epitaph asked.

“Of what?”

“There are other methods of distinguishing devils from humans, besides checking the ears.”

Huh? Angelica just barely stopped herself from making a sound. *There are? I had no idea.*

“I see. I wasn’t aware of that,” she said.

“It surprises me that someone as knowledgeable as yourself would be unaware. Though I suppose I only know about it because such things interest me greatly.”

Angelica didn’t care to learn this man’s interests, but she did want to know how to tell whether this was a long-eared. She wouldn’t argue if the method was so secret that she’d have to leave the tent, but otherwise she hoped he’d share it.

“If you’re able to teach it to me, I’d be most grateful,” she said.

“Oh, but of course,” Epitaph replied.

“Then if you would be so kind.”

“Yes. I’ll begin right away.”

Great.

Epitaph put on some leather gloves that were already there in the room, then began removing the long-eared’s armor to expose the skin. The cloth around the head was bloodsoaked, but everything below was clean. The body had hair on its chest, and the skin was slightly brown without any blood or dirt caked on.

Somehow, it didn’t look like a long-eared’s body. Then again, Angelica had never studied the naked body of a man before, so she still couldn’t be certain.

Next, Epitaph removed his saber from its scabbard, brought the pointed tip to the long-eared’s stomach, then created a vertical cut down the middle. He wiped the saber clean with a cloth and returned it to its scabbard.

His incredibly unusual behavior made Angelica knit her brow. *What’s he doing...?*

Epitaph then removed the leather gloves and rolled up his sleeve.

No, he wouldn’t...

Angelica gasped as Epitaph plunged his bare hand into the long-eared’s abdomen.

He groped around inside, seemingly having practiced this before, tore part of an organ, then pulled his arm out.

His arm was covered in fresh, red blood when it emerged. Then, as if nothing was amiss, Epitaph used his clean hand to pour water from a flask over the organ and his crimson-colored arm.

Once he’d gotten a look at the freshly removed viscera, he calmly declared, “This is indeed a human. Devils’ spleens have a different shape. The easiest way for me to explain the difference would be to show you a devil spleen and a human spleen side by side. However, I’ll have to describe the difference instead. A devil’s spleen is a little bigger than this one and a little more rounded overall.”

“Ugh...” Angelica was struck by an urge to vomit.

He just cut open a human and removed their spleen... This is that great

interest he was talking about? It's beyond me.

"Hm... I should have known it would be too intense for a woman to witness. You must forgive me for being so inconsiderate."

Epitaph dropped the spleen back into the man's abdomen, as if he had no further use for it, then wiped his hand clean with a cloth.

"N-Not at all. Thank you for teaching me..."

"You're welcome." Epitaph smiled warmly, then turned to Felmut. "Well, Count Felmut? This matter was your responsibility, was it not?"

Epitaph was still smiling, but he wore it like a mask.

"M-M-M-M-My apologies. B-B-B-But..." Felmut had gone pale, sweat dripping profusely from his forehead.

Only now did Angelica understand why Felmut had been so fearful of Epitaph. Felmut must've heard tales of his bloody reputation.

"How will you explain yourself?" Epitaph asked.

"I wasn't aware that d-demons and people had d-different spleens!"

"A pitiful excuse. Lady Angelica here was immediately suspicious; even more so when I removed the armor and she saw his brown skin. You were so naive that you didn't so much as remove his armor. Two demons are now on the run because of your gullibility. You've brought shame on us all."

"Y-Yes... I'm sincerely sorry... I'll use all of the resources in my power to apprehend them." He lowered his head as he apologized.

"Very well. But you must apologize before God also."

"Huh?"

Epitaph made his move just as Felmut raised his head to find out whether Epitaph looked sincere. In his right hand, Epitaph gripped the scabbard that held the saber. Then, with a single movement, he drew the blade with his left hand and sliced Felmut's throat.

"Ngh." Felmut's hands clutched his neck as he made a sound similar to someone gulping. It was little use—blood poured from the wound made by the

saber's sharp blade.

"Gahgh... Boh..."

Felmut was trying to say something, but the blade must've cut his windpipe because his voice couldn't be heard through the blood.

"Nghuuh!"

After he'd tried to use the air in his lungs to speak, he struggled to inhale again. His blood mixed with his breath when he tried. Felmut dropped to his knees and began to writhe on the ground. Before long, he fell silent.

"Was it necessary to kill him?" Angelica, covered in splashes of Felmut's blood, asked in protest. Her urge to vomit had disappeared.

"Don't you see, Lady Angelica?"

"See what?"

"We lost half of our supplies in that attack. Someone as well-versed in military matters as yourself will understand how badly that affects us. The same great demon who did this then tricked us this way. Now there are two of them on the run, completely unharmed and making a mockery of God."

Apparently, those supplies had been half of what the Papal Territory had brought. Putting it all in a big pile certainly made everything easy to guard and manage, but to Angelica it sounded like an incredible display of laziness.

"And now, because of this man's incompetence, three days have passed without a serious effort to hunt them down. It amounts to a betrayal against God. As knights of the Papal State, we have an obligation to put our hearts and souls into our efforts to eradicate all devils."

"Then he was a traitor who deserved a death sentence?"

"Yes, indeed."

I've never heard anything so ridiculous. He was a bumbling idiot, maybe, but not a traitor. Does he think that incompetence itself is an affront to our faith?

"I see. I am grateful for your keen insight." Angelica hid her true feelings as she spoke.

“I’m pleased to hear that you’ve understood.”

“How will we track them down?” Angelica asked. “My forces are available to you if you need them.”

This was what really mattered.

Angelica was learning every last detail about this region. The long-eareds might’ve been given a three-day head start, but they were running on foot through the forest. Catching them was still very possible—their speed wouldn’t compare to someone riding a horse over a road.

The pair were probably headed for the royal capital—it hadn’t been captured yet—so it was a simple matter of getting ahead of them and then closing the net. If Angelica successfully captured them, it would put the Papal State in her debt.

“No, I’ve asked Peninsula’s forces to handle this.”

“Oh... Very well.”

The Peninsula Kingdom had also lost some of its resources in the attack.

Angelica was a total outsider with regards to this matter. She had no choice but to stand aside and let the affected parties handle it themselves.

“The Peninsula isn’t looking for glory. This role suits them.”

Angelica couldn’t understand why the Papal State wasn’t assigning some of its own forces to handle this, given their grudge against the fleeing long-eareds. It was possible that their forces didn’t want the job because they’d lose opportunities to do more important things elsewhere.

The Peninsula Kingdom wasn’t particularly concerned about the level of contribution they made to the war. They might’ve actually been best suited to the task.

“Yes, I think you’re right. Now I must return to my camp.” Since Angelica hadn’t been given a role to perform, there was no reason to remain here.

“Very well. May you remain in good health,” Epitaph said with the same mask-like smile.

“Thank you.”

Angelica felt there was something cold about that grin as she stepped out of the tent and left the stench of blood behind.

IV

Four days had passed since we'd crashed.

Right in front of me was a road that we needed to cross. This road had been used to move goods since long ago. Back when rocks were quarried from the mountain where the fortress now stood, they'd been exported via this path. Back then, it had been busy with carts transporting them to the sea. Naturally, the surface was cobbled with rock from Verdun.

I poked my head out to see whether there was any traffic. There was nothing there but leaves.

What a relief.

This surfaced road formed a straight line between the fortress and the sea through the forest we were in. If soldiers had been posted here, we'd have had no way to escape. If they'd chosen to prevent us from getting across, we'd be as hopeless as bugs caught in a net. We'd be surrounded by enemy territory, and the sea would be the only place left to go.

If it had to come to that, I was going to risk everything on an attempt to break through at night. The very thought made my hair stand on end.

If we could just get beyond this point safely, there'd be no more large roads like this between us and Reforme. There'd merely be a crisscrossing network of paths used by villagers moving through the forest. Those didn't pose a threat, because they weren't ideal places for soldiers to set up checkpoints.

This appeared to confirm something—the enemy couldn't have known Carol's identity. All the enemy knew was that there was one unknown Shanti eagle rider (and thus a Shanti noble) on the run—or two such Shanti if they'd seen through my attempts to disguise the dragon rider. They didn't know that there was specifically a blonde Shanti on the run. If they did, then assuming they weren't completely incompetent, they would've posted soldiers to watch every

single road and closed off the entire forest. That's just how valuable blonde Shanti were. Positioning a thousand soldiers to seal off the whole forest would've been a great burden, even for an army of tens of thousands of soldiers. It wouldn't be worth all that effort for the sake of catching one no-name noble. But it was a different story when the target was someone as valuable as Carol, so the enemy clearly hadn't realized it was her.

I turned away from the road and walked back.

Some way into the forest, I found Carol looking nervous, her back leaning against a tree.

"How's it look?" she asked.

"It's fine. There's no one watching."

"So... Are we gonna go for it?"

"Yeah. It's a shame we can't wait until night."

Although the road wasn't under constant watch, there'd still be people using it. It was a straight line with no meandering turns, so we'd be visible from afar while crossing.

"That'd waste a whole day, wouldn't it?"

The sun had only just finished rising to its highest point in the sky. We couldn't be sure pursuers weren't following behind us, so waiting here for a whole afternoon would waste too much time.

Even without pursuers, Verdun might end up falling if we were too slow. The last thing I wanted was to reach Nikka Village, only to find the enemy already there, then walk to Reforme and find it encircled.

"All right. Well, let's get going." Carol used her staff to climb to her feet.

Meanwhile, I crouched with my back to her.

As was routine now, Carol put her staff into her belt, then placed her weight on my back. I felt her chest against me, followed by her arms wrapping around my neck. I grabbed both of her legs, then with some effort, I stood up. I'd gotten the hang of this after doing it over and over for the past few days.

We walked for five minutes before the road came into view again.

“Yuri,” Carol whispered in my ear, “I heard something.”

I shuddered and came to a stop.

I hadn’t heard anything, but my labored breathing had probably drowned out the noise. I held my breath and concentrated on the sounds around me. First I heard my own heart racing from the tough walk, and then something else coming from far off.

Time to turn back? No, it’s no use. If it’s a scout on foot, they might see us walking away. That’d be worse.

I crouched and put Carol down on the ground where she’d be hidden by a large tree trunk.

The sound had grown a lot louder by this point. I recognized it as horse’s hooves hitting the road’s surface. The distinctive *clop clop* was drawing closer.

Horse’s hooves had to be fitted with horseshoes because they weren’t well-suited to walking long distances over stone surfaces. The vibrations caused by the iron horseshoes hitting against the stone surface were amplified by the thick material of the hoof, creating the sound.

“Keep quiet,” I warned.

“I’m not stupid.”

I guess that went without saying.

It was incredibly fortunate that Carol had heard the sound. We’d be in real trouble if we’d stepped out onto the road and gotten spotted.

On the other hand, it was too soon to assume that it was an enemy soldier. There was still a chance that some circumstance had caused the enemy to advance slower than expected after their victory in battle. It could be a Shanti soldier—that would be a major improvement to our situation. All I’d have to do would be to step out and shout, “Hey! We need help!” I’d instantly have an answer to the question that was turning over in my mind. I remained silent, though.

I guess I’ll wait...

The sound of hooves grew closer. As I listened to the incessant sound, I realized it wasn't just a single horse, but a group of several dozen. In addition to the horses, I also heard the rattling of wheels moving over the rough stone surface. The sound kept growing louder. As the din grew, I knew it had to be a large group.

"Don't stick your head out. If they see your hair, that'll be the worst that could happen," I said quietly.

Her golden color would stand out too much here in the forest. Just a quick peek out from behind the tree could be enough to attract someone's attention.

"Okay."

"I'll take a look."

A few moments later, just as the sound was reaching us, I poked my head half out from behind the tree and looked at the road.

What entered my vision was a procession of people and horse-drawn carts.

I quickly got back behind the tree.

No. It's the enemy. Their clothes clearly didn't have Shanti designs—these are Kulati. The enemy's here... Should've known things weren't going to be so easy. Now we'll have to wait until it's safe to cross.

It looked like a supply train. They were heading from the direction of the port and toward the fortress. That meant there was a good chance the port had already fallen.

Haaah... Now there's no getting home that way...

The situation was so awful that pessimistic thoughts were draining me of motivation. It crushed my will to consider the future, and my brain was burning up calories just by grappling with all my worries.

I had to make a conscious effort to stop myself from thinking negatively—I knew it was a waste, and it would only make my situation worse. But just a week earlier, this region had been entirely within our side's control. Now the enemy was marching a supply train straight through it.

I wanna cry. No... This is the whole reason the fortress exists. It's not so bleak.

They could've ignored Verdun Fortress and continued to advance, but then they'd risk being attacked from behind by enemies who emerged from the fortress. Ignoring it would leave their frontline forces open to a pincer attack. Their supply lines could be cut off too. No one would be stupid enough to ignore the fortress.

Another approach would be to give up on capturing the fortress and surround it with soldiers instead. That way, no one could get out. Then the remaining forces could continue advancing. However, this would make them a smaller, weaker force when they attacked Reforme—or whatever their next target was. The fortress had the potential to cause the enemy untold problems.

The enemy won't follow us beyond here until they've captured the fortress...hopefully. But should I really pin our hopes on Verdun Fortress?

As I was conflicted over what to do, I heard a noise from the road.

Clunk!

It sounded like something hard.

Carol must've gotten quite startled, because I felt her tremble violently at my feet. I'd gotten quite a shock myself.

What was that...?

As curious as I was, I didn't dare peek out. If the enemy had just run into some trouble, they'd be on high alert. Things weren't the same for them anymore. The peaceful forest now held new significance for them, and several soldiers would be watching it closely.

Now what?

We heard the creaking sound of a cart coming to a halt.

"Gah, it fell off."

Only I understood what was being said. The voice spoke Kulatish—or more accurately, Terolish—so it would be meaningless to Carol.

Soon after, I heard a rapid *clap clap* of hooves coming from the south. It sounded like a horse that wasn't pulling a cart—in other words, one being ridden.

“It fell?! What’re you doing?!” It sounded like the commanding officer was berating the man who’d previously spoken.

“I’m sorry!”

Unlike Harol, the only native speaker of Terolish I’d ever been able to listen to was Ms. Ether. These soldiers spoke with a much stronger dialect that I’d heard from Ms. Ether, and the intonation sounded so odd to me that I struggled to catch what they were saying.

Ms. Ether spoke Terolish with the most widely recognized pronunciations as spoken in Vaticanus, but Terolish was spoken over a vast area. Dialects were bound to be found in the areas far from the Papal State.

“Tsk... Get it back on the cart!”

“Yes, sir!”

What did they just drop?

The noise had been so loud that it had to be something fairly heavy, but it didn’t sound like a big sack of apples or a large wooden crate.

“Nnnnnngh!”

I clearly heard the sound of someone straining. It sounded like they were really struggling. In any other situation, I might’ve laughed.

“Haah... Haah... Don’t just stand there! Help!”

There was no way he was shouting like that at the man who’d just berated him a few moments ago.

“All right.” The reply came from someone I hadn’t heard until now. It was a dull, sluggish sort of voice.

“You grab that side.”

“Nnnnnngh!”

“Uh! Ungh...”

“Haah, haah... It’s no good...”

It sounded like they weren’t making any progress. Whatever the fallen item

was, they couldn't lift it with all their strength. They were both adult men (or so I assumed), and yet it was too heavy for them.

Maybe it's a full barrel of wine...?

But it didn't sound like one. And a heavy barrel like that would've probably smashed on the ground.

"What?! You can't lift it?!"

"Haah... If you tried to lift it yourself, you'd see it's too much for us."

Sounds like they're having a hard time. What'll they do now? Whatever it is, I hope they get on with it quickly, because we're stuck here waiting for them to leave.

"If no one can lift it, then how'd it get loaded onto the cart at the port in the first place?!"

"Well... There was this huge monster of a man there who got it on with levers. We can't move it with just our thin arms."

"Tsk... You're useless!"

"Haaah..."

How about you get down off your horse so the three of you can lift it? I thought, even though it wasn't my problem.

Naturally, no one else suggested the idea to the commanding officer either. If he was a noble, he had to maintain appearances.

"That's enough! Just leave it there!"

"Here? You're sure?"

"It's only one! Push it to the roadside! But lose any more and I'll see to it that you lose an arm!"

"Yes sir..."

It took them about a minute after that.

I heard the sound of a string being tied, then the crack of reins. The sound of hooves against the stone road resumed as the cart started up again.

With the supply train on the move again, the clapping sounds resumed.

What was that thing...?

I only stepped out to check the road once the sound was completely gone. The road was dead quiet, as if the clamor from a little while ago had all been a dream.

“I’ll go take a look,” I said quietly.

Carol nodded.

I cautiously approached the road, first making sure there was no one around. For as far as I could see, it was completely deserted.

I scanned the road surface, looking for the thing they’d dropped. It didn’t take long to spot it—in fact, it practically leapt out at me.

A rock. It’s a boulder as wide as my shoulders.

But it wasn’t the kind of rock you’d find in a forest. It had been carved into a round ball by a chisel or some such.

Hmmm, is this...granite, maybe?

The texture was nothing like sandstone, limestone, or any other type of stone that might break apart when hit with a hammer.

There was a crack in the road where the rock had landed. It was clearly different from ordinary weathering—the stones forming the road surface had split open.

There was no way a thing like this could be lifted by anyone. If I’d been ordered to do it, I’d want to tell my superior they were asking the impossible. It had to weigh more than 150 kilograms.

Two or three people might’ve been able to lift the weight alone if they put all their strength into it, but the problem with this thing was the shape. It was hard to grip because it was round. If one person’s grip were to slip while lifting, there was a good chance it would fall and crush someone’s toes.

As much as the noble on horseback must’ve hated to do so, giving up and abandoning this thing by the roadside had been the smart choice.

I could easily guess what they were planning to do with strange, large rocks like these. All I could do was offer my condolences to whoever was defending the fortress.

That said, there was still hope that some sort of accident would stop their plan from working. The whole thing was probably an experiment, so there was a reasonable chance that it would blow up in their faces and end in failure.

Either way, it was impressive that they'd gotten everything prepared not even a week after winning the battle. They must've carefully planned every last detail. I almost felt like congratulating the enemy.

But if they were capable of such clever planning, then the chances of us being saved through some accident were looking slim.

I'd better get back.

The situation was beyond my powers. I stopped studying the giant rock and went back into the forest to find Carol.

Chapter 5 — The Pursuers

I

A man named Wallis was walking through a forest in the far north.

He was a twenty-eight-year-old member of the Peninsula Kingdom Special Expedition Force.

The Peninsula Kingdom was a nation still deeply scarred by the Fearsome War that had ended 175 years ago. During this fifty-year war, half of their nation's territory had been occupied by the Entak Dragon Kingdom—a nation of heretics—and the southern part of the nation had remained under heretical control for forty years.

Even after the war ended, the heretics had left their bloodlines behind, and their determined efforts at religious conversion resulted in a merging of the two nations' cultures that persisted to that day.

Even the name Wallis was such a remnant. When said by speakers of Anish—the language of Kokorlism nations—it was pronounced “waah-lis.” But Wallis himself had no knowledge of this, and the origin of his name was unknown to him. He had no surname.

Since his birth, Wallis hadn't received an education of any kind. He'd only ever learned to read insofar as his work required it. He was the third child born to a pair of tenant farmers who'd named him Wallis after a distant relative who'd become a priest. After raising him for a time, they'd passed him over to a “mediator” once they'd struggled to feed him.

A mediator was like a slave trader. In exchange for a fee, they introduced children to places where their labor was required.

Since slave-hunting within the nation's territory was forbidden by national law, slave traders had to operate under another guise. While they described the process as introducing a child to work, the reality was that the parents were

selling their child to the workplace for a large sum, and the workplace paid an even larger amount to the mediator. In the end, this complex arrangement simply amounted to placing a child into forced labor.

Unlike real slaves, however, there was a limit to how long the child would have to work.

Wallis had been employed by a local ruler as a general laborer in the mountains. His employment duration had been ten years. He'd been sold at the age of eleven, and when his employment finished at the age of twenty-one, he had nothing to his name except one set of ragged clothing and a few copper coins.

By chance, he'd become a soldier after being recruited by an armed force. The force valued the strength of the men they recruited, so they fed them well. They were even given basic sleeping quarters. For Wallis, it had seemed like a perfect opportunity.

About seven years had passed since then. Wallis had learned to use the sword, shield, and spear, and had also practiced with guns and bows. There was a fee, however, for using gunpowder during training, so he'd only fired live rounds once or twice. For that reason, his training had been almost entirely focused on the use of old-fashioned weaponry.

What had come next was a call for volunteers to join a northern crusade force.

Now, like always, the Peninsula Kingdom hadn't had any interest in joining the northern crusade forces.

Though the Peninsula Kingdom was part of Yeesusdom, it lay furthest to the south and had never held much interest in the affairs of territory that lay in the far north. For a time, they'd avoided participating in crusades completely, but their disinterest had drawn the ire of the Papal State, and a bitter dispute had led to the outbreak of war. Their king was beheaded, and then someone else took the throne.

For some time after, the Peninsula Kingdom would dispatch forces ten thousand men strong, but this time a mere 1,003 soldiers were joining the crusade. They were merely dispatched so that the Peninsula Kingdom could say

that it had participated, and it had only done so to meet obligations that the Papal State had placed on it.

The kingdom wanted nothing in exchange for its efforts, and its forces weren't actively engaged in invading new territory like the others. Instead, the kingdom's soldiers preferred to serve as a rear guard or defend supply lines—roles other nations were less willing to take up. If the kingdom's work was appreciated, an improvement in diplomatic relations was anticipated, but more importantly, sticking to these tasks would ensure that the soldiers' lives weren't being wasted.

However, this all stemmed from national policy. It all meant nothing to individual soldiers if there were no opportunities to make money from the war. In order to make the seemingly pointless expedition to the north more appealing, participants were offered a fifty percent increase on their ordinary salary.

That increase had been Wallis's motivation for signing up. Unfortunately, he'd been given the most troublesome hunting mission—he'd been ordered to search the forest for two long-eareds that had fled several days earlier.

Wallis silently trod over ground strewn with dead leaves and fallen branches. The leaves of deciduous trees had formed a thick layer, and the ground was sodden, having repeatedly frozen and thawed in the harsh cold. With each step, he sank into the ground a little, and water oozed out from under his feet.

His hometown had always experienced a gentle sea breeze, and there was never soil like this. Here, the combination of gloomy weather and frigid air was putting him in a foul mood.

The man up ahead—a hunter by the name of Earley—appeared to feel the same way.

Wallis's job was simply to carry the heavy equipment. The man in front only had light equipment, but he still moved slowly because he was studying the ground carefully as he went. They were following a track left by others...not that Wallis could see it.

After a while, Earley came to a stop and turned around. When Wallis caught up, he asked, "How about we rest?"

“Isn’t it too soon?”

“Soon or not, I’m beat.”

Earley spoke a little like an old man, though he wasn’t particularly elderly. He looked to be approaching forty. In any case, Earley was Wallis’s senior, so he didn’t argue.

“Whew,” Earley sighed. “This is a waste of time. Can’t read this dirt.”

“What do you mean?”

“If this were back in my hometown, I could take a look at a single print in the soil there ’n figure out how many hours ago a beast passed through. But this soil here? Can’t get my head around it.”

It sounded like Earley was making excuses.

“Now, if we had dogs...” he began.

“Keep trying,” Wallis said. “We’ll get a special reward if we kill one of those long-eareds.”

A noble had told them there was a reward of two gold coins for whoever killed the long-eareds. That was more money than Wallis had ever seen in his life.

“You won’t be gettin’ any gold. Nation’s full of liars.”

Ever since they’d been paired up since a few days ago, Wallis had been piecing together a few things about Earley. He claimed he’d once been imprisoned in a dungeon on some false charge, leaving him bitter and cynical. The whole reason he’d quit hunting to be a soldier was because the accusation had forced him out of his village.

Wallis didn’t know or care whether Earley really *had* been falsely accused, but whatever he’d been through had left him with no faith in their country, and it made him hard to work with.

Earley sat down without waiting for Wallis to agree.

“Anyway, it was that awful face skinner who sent us chasing them. I’d love a gold coin, but it won’t be much good if he kills us.”

Wallis had heard him say this before. Apparently the noble liked to skin the faces of enemies who tried to flee, perhaps as a warning to others who might do the same. It was like he was mimicking the practices of barbarians from the east; barbarians with no culture.

“We’re not searching for beasts. They’re almost adults. The footprints should be deep.”

It stood to reason that deeper footprints would be easier to spot. All this talk about not being familiar with the dirt was obviously an excuse to rest.

“You never heard of quittin’ while you’re ahead?” Earley asked.

“We won’t get any money if we quit.”

Wallis hadn’t heard anything about rewards in the event that the long-eareds escaped alive. They probably wouldn’t get a single coin in exchange for a mere sighting.

“Bah...” Earley groaned.

“Be reasonable,” Wallis spat as dark feelings welled up inside of him. “I’m telling you, we’ve got to work to earn our pay. Besides, we’ll be in trouble if we’re late to the rendezvous point.”

“Hmph...”

They didn’t move for another ten minutes or so.

“Done resting yet?”

“Yeah.”

Earley got up and began to walk while looking at the ground again.

There was still bad air between them, and neither spoke.

Before long, the trees became dense, and Wallis began to fall behind Earley until they were about ten paces apart.

They walked like that for a while. Suddenly, a wooden rod emerged from the forest and hit Earley, avoiding the thin metal plate of Earley’s helm and hitting him hard on the neck instead, causing him to collapse to the ground.

Before Wallis could make sense of what was happening, a man—his face

painted black—stepped out from behind a tree and reached for Earley’s body.

“Eek...”

He looked like one of the evil spirits said to live in the forest.

The spirit didn’t seem to notice Wallis as it searched Earley’s body. It must have wanted to rob him.

The enemy still hadn’t noticed him, so Wallis decided to fight. He quietly reached for the shortbow behind his back.

He’d fired countless arrows into straw figures in training. Despite the situation, he was able to repeat those same movements, smoothly and without shaking. He took his bow, removed an arrow from his quiver, notched it, steadied himself, then drew. The bow creaked as he took aim.

It was only then that the enemy suddenly looked at Wallis.

The moment their eyes met, Wallis released his right hand’s grip on the bowstring.

He’d aimed at the man’s torso, but since his aim was a little off, it flew toward his face instead. Still, it carried enough speed that Wallis felt sure he’d just dealt a fatal blow.

The arrow hit nothing. It was caught.

The man had jerked his head aside, then moved his arm so quickly that Wallis couldn’t follow the motion. The next thing he knew, the arrow was in the man’s grip. The arrowhead that should have penetrated his flesh and bones was left suspended in midair.

The enemy studied his catch in his hand, as if he was a little surprised by it too. Then, he casually threw the arrow aside and returned to his former stance. His blade glinted as he drew it from its sheath, and then he charged at Wallis like a raging beast.

Wallis gasped.

Knowing he’d never have time to fire a second arrow, he threw his bow on the ground, crouched slightly, and drew his sword. Unfortunately, this was an unfamiliar movement. There hadn’t been any drills to practice throwing away a

bow and drawing a sword in an emergency. What's more, his fear made him clumsy.

By the time his sword was drawn, the enemy had gone from being ten steps away to one.

Wallis swung the sword without pausing to steady himself, but the blade didn't cut into the man's flesh; instead, Wallis felt a heavy impact against his arm. The man had hit Wallis's sword arm with his fist.

The powerful blow to his forward arm left his sword hand feeling numb. Somehow he managed to maintain his grip, but then his arm was grabbed and the wrist twisted violently. Wallis's hand opened, letting the sword fall to the ground.

Next came a kick to his chest that knocked him down.

At this point, Wallis lost hope. He couldn't beat this opponent—the difference in skill was too stark. He'd never stood a chance against a man who could stop a flying arrow by catching it.

He's a monster. This is where my life ends.

But then the enemy kicked Wallis onto his stomach and bound both his arms behind his back with some sort of rope. The man pulled Wallis up using the rope, then sat him down on the ground.

He crouched so that his face was right in front of Wallis.

Wallis had thought this being was some kind of evil spirit, but it was clearly just a man with black mud smeared over his face.

"Okay, sir..." The man had suddenly begun speaking Wallis's native language. "Or rather, okay, you..."

"Ha ha..." The situation confused Wallis so much that he couldn't help but laugh.

Is this a dream? How come he speaks my language? If he's the one we're chasing, shouldn't he talk in that nonsense long-eared language?

"You've got some guts if you can laugh at a time like this. Let me give you some good news—I'm not planning on killing you. The bad news is that I'm

going to question you, and if you lie, you'll be in so much pain you'll *wish* I'd killed you. If you still refuse to talk, you'll be left with some agonizing wounds that'll kill you anyway." The devil man was speaking rapidly. "I've already tortured three of your kind. If what you tell me doesn't match what they told me, I'll know you're lying. But if you're honest with me, you'll get through this unharmed. You won't have to go through life with a missing arm or eye. You won't have to spend each day hiding your face because you've got no nose. If you want an ordinary life after this, keep talking and keep it honest. I'm not going to torture you slowly either—I'll get to gouging out your eyes pretty quickly."

Wallis looked at what lay behind the man, where Earley had fallen. He was still on the ground and didn't so much as stir. If Earley was alive, he might wake up and attack the enemy from behind. It was possible, but too much to hope for.

"Okay. First question. What's your name?"

Immediately, Wallis decided he didn't want to give up his name. He also knew that his interrogator *couldn't* know his name. He reasoned that he only wanted a name for the sake of making the conversation easier; it didn't have to be the real one.

"Karimistr Hopper," he lied.

The man stood up straight, then suddenly lifted his foot before stomping down on Wallis's outstretched leg. It was like being hit with a hammer. Wallis heard a dull cracking sound from his bones, and pain shot through his leg.

"Ugh."

Just as he tried to scream, the man's fist walloped him across the cheek. Wallis had been punched hard, and he collapsed to the ground.

"No loud noises."

"Guh... Uggghh."

Pain was still shooting through his broken leg, but Wallis forced himself not to scream.

Next, the man stood on Wallis's neck, roughly removed his helm, grabbed his hair, and violently pulled him up. He was forced from the ground back into a sitting position.

Their eyes met once more.

"Didn't I tell you I'd know when you're lying? You must be as dumb as a three-year-old kid. Or maybe you thought I'd actually show mercy to the piece of cockroach shit who's out here trying to kill me?"

There was no hint of kindness in the man's voice. His eyes were like those of a dangerous animal—like a starving beast, cornered and desperate.

"One more time. What's your name?"

"W-Wallis! Longfinger Wallis!"

He felt it was odd not to give a surname, so he gave his nickname instead. Longfinger was a moniker he'd gotten during his ten-year employment because his ring finger was as long as his middle finger. The reason he'd been given a nickname was because there'd been another man named Wallis at the same workplace. It wasn't a lie.

"Ah, so you're Wallis."

On hearing that, Wallis figured that someone else must have given up his name. Karimistr Hopper was something he'd thought up on the spot, rather than the name of another expedition member. If he'd said Earley instead, the devil might have mistaken him for Earley. But Karimistr had been a bad choice.

"All right. Next question. How many people are there after me?"

"A th-thousand," Wallis answered truthfully.

"Okay... Then why are you alone? If there are a thousand people after me, why don't they form a line and comb through this whole forest?"

"You don't know? Six hundred of them are searching elsewhere. There're only two hundred here."

"Those numbers don't add up—that's only eight hundred. Where are the rest?"

“They’re searching on the other side of that big road. You should know that already!”

If he just wanted to know how many people they had, then he should’ve learned that already when questioning the others. That meant that he was asking these questions just to check that the answers matched up with what others had said, similarly to when he’d asked for a name.

To Wallis, the man was being far too distrusting. He wished he would just let him go rather than going to all this trouble to double-check a few details.

“Okay. So a group of six hundred are headed straight for Reforme and tearing up the coastal regions as they go. Meanwhile, there’s two hundred of you keeping watch in the nearby forest just in case?”

“That’s right. Are you happy now?”

“Yeah. Your stories match up, at least. Are the large and small companies on this side cooperating with each other closely?”

“How should I know?”

Wallis was genuinely unaware. Even if the two companies were cooperating, any soldier as low-ranking as him wouldn’t be told about it.

“All right. You’re just a clueless private, aren’t you?”

“Give me a break. I didn’t ask for your pity.”

“Okay, next question. What’s your unit’s command structure?”

“Command structure?”

It wasn’t a term Wallis was used to.

“Never heard of that before? There’s a thousand of you. Who’s in charge of it all? Who leads the unit of two hundred that you’re with? Who’s your commanding officer? How many men are serving under them?”

“Huh? Didn’t the others tell you?”

“Of course they did, but they might’ve lied. I want to hear from you so I can compare answers.”

Is it really that important? Wallis couldn’t understand why anyone would

need to hear minor details like those three times over. “Our commander is Prince Zayeed. Zayeed Samrikamri.”

“And where’s he now?”

“He’s leading the unit of six hundred, but I don’t know whether he’s actually in the field. He’s...too important to be wandering around a forest like this.”

“Okay, next. Who’s leading the unit of two hundred?”

“My unit of two hundred? I’m one of Count Pinnock Drain’s soldiers. We’re here under Lord Pinnock’s command.”

“Then who’s your direct superior?”

“An old guy called Strongarm Jen. He leads a squad of ten.” Wallis was telling him everything. If the others had already talked, no one would know where the information had come from. No one would be able to blame him later.

“I see I’ve got you talking. Now tell me your mission.”

“Huh? Chasing after you, obviously.”

“Me personally? Or all surviving soldiers?”

“We’re after you two because you’re the ones who burned our supplies.”

The man looked more serious now. “What? Keep talking.”

“Don’t act like you don’t know already.”

The moment Wallis finished speaking, the man raised his hand. He slapped Wallis hard across the cheek with his open palm. Wallis felt something in his nose break, and then blood came trickling out.

“Youch...”

“Watch your mouth. Now tell me who you’re chasing.”

“Two eagle riders who crashed. They dropped fire from the sky and embarrassed the Papal State. Got them real mad. Aren’t you both together?”

“What are you talking about? I’m no eagle rider. I was on a bird, but it couldn’t fly. I’m just an ordinary officer fleeing the battlefield a little late.”

Questions swirled in Wallis’s mind. *He’s not one of the ones we’re after? He’s*

just an ordinary defeated soldier?

The devil tsked. “How’d I get caught up in this?” he muttered to himself.

Wallis’s guess appeared to be right.

Wallis had been assigned to security at the rear, but he knew that a big battle had happened elsewhere. There were bound to be soldiers who’d fled into the forest rather than using the roads. And it wouldn’t be just one either—there could easily be hundreds, or even a thousand.

And it just so happened that the one Wallis had pursued was a master of combat. It could only be described as bad luck.

“Heh heh, ha ha ha! Too bad for you!” Wallis found the man’s situation so funny, yet tragic, that he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Shut it!”

The man punched him in the face again, but Wallis still found it all funny.

“Ha ha ha... Ah.” As Wallis hit the ground, he saw Earley’s body lying ten paces away. “Hey, is that old guy still alive?”

Wallis had been truthful, so now he assumed Earley would be spared... If he was still alive.

“Oh, him? I’ll go finish him.”

“What? Why?”

This guy must be as heartless as he looks.

“If you insist, then I’ll leave him as he is, but his neck’s broken. If he ever wakes up, he’ll just die in a lot of pain. The merciful thing would be to finish him now.”

“Then go ahead and do it,” Wallis replied without needing to think.

He sensed that the man was being honest, and while he would have preferred to see Earley survive, he wouldn’t be too upset over his death.

“All right. I’m done asking questions. Good work.”

The man then put a cloth over Wallis’s mouth and tied it tight behind his

head. This would stop him from shouting. It seemed he was going to leave Wallis's arms bound too. He'd be left unable to call for help and with a broken leg. He realized that he'd be in a hopeless situation if he was abandoned like that.

"Nnngh!!!" Wallis tried to scream with all his might.

The man showed no interest in him at all. Instead, he rummaged through Wallis's belongings, then chose to take his entire knapsack.

After that, he didn't so much as look back.

He went to where Earley lay and stabbed him in the back of his neck to end his life. He put the body on its back, crossed himself, and then chanted something just like a clergyman. Then he rummaged through Earley's belongings.

When that was over, he disappeared in the forest.

II

"I'm back," I said.

Carol was sitting safely behind a tree.

"Hi..." Carol seemed relieved as she looked at me with tired eyes. She must've been worried.

"We'll talk later. We should walk farther today."

I began quickly cleaning up our things. The bag I'd just stolen was some sort of knapsack. It wasn't particularly well-made, but it would be easy to carry around.

I had to throw a few unnecessary items away so that I could fit everything in the bag. Luckily, he'd been carrying a shovel with a sharp point, so it was easy to bury everything we didn't need.

I still can't believe I caught that arrow.

Although it had been a slow-moving arrow fired from a poor-quality shortbow, I'd still surprised myself. It was like people gained superhuman powers in life-or-death situations.

I figured I'd dodge arrows normally next time, because the splinters in my hand were painful. If I hadn't caught it, the arrow would've only scratched my cheek.

"All right, let's go."

I put the knapsack on over my stomach and tightened up the strap at the waist, then turned my back to Carol and crouched down.

Once the sun was beginning to set, I put Carol down in the nearest suitable spot.

"Let's have extra to eat."

The knapsack was heavy, suggesting that those two had been planning on a long march. There was a lot of preserved food inside. This morning I'd been starting to feel pain from hunger, but now we had so much food I was struggling to carry it.

"You're not starting a fire?" Carol asked.

"Definitely not. They've caught up to us."

The light of a fire would be visible from some distance away. If I were in the enemy's shoes, I'd call for backup the moment I saw one, surround the spot, and then attack in the dead of night.

They'd find us sleeping beside our fire. Carol might wake up, but by that point it would already be too late for us to escape, especially since I had to carry her.

"Okay. We'd better not, then," Carol agreed without any arguing.

It would be tough not having the warmth of a fire. Even the bread we had wouldn't taste or smell as good because we couldn't toast it at all.

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize. There's no need."

"Yeah... You're right."

I guess it was a weird thing to apologize for.

"Once we've eaten, let's get some sleep," I said.

“We’ve still got things to talk about today. You haven’t told me what happened.”

Oh, that’s right.

In any case, I’d thought covering a good distance was our biggest priority, so I hadn’t stopped to discuss things. Carol seemed to have understood the situation somewhat, because she’d picked up on it and hadn’t questioned me while we were moving, despite her curiosity.

“We can talk while we eat.”

I sat down on a dry patch of ground. I was sitting close to Carol so that we could keep our voices down.

“All right. We’ve got time, so I’ll start from the beginning. First, I killed someone with a surprise attack. Then I got the other pinned down. There were two of them.”

I’d used a spear with the point still sheathed. The shaft was made of particularly hard wood. The shafts of spears made for use on eagles were quite narrow because they were designed to be lightweight, but they were still tough enough to break someone’s neck if swung hard enough.

“Oh...”

“He was still alive, so I listened to what he had to say.”

“Okay. And he told you something?”

“Yeah. They’ve got a force of a thousand chasing us.”

“Huh?!”

For a moment, it looked like Carol would drop the bread she was holding. It was a shocking piece of news. I’d almost been at a loss for words when I’d first heard.

“But six hundred of them are searching someplace else. They think we’ve taken the road and headed for Reforme directly. They’re searching for us along the coast.”

“Oh, okay...”

“Right. We’re headed for Nikka Village, but they wouldn’t expect us to head that way. We were right to avoid the coast.”

This kingdom’s coastline was complicated, but it wasn’t quite as full of cliffs as the fjords behind the mountains in Shiyalta were. It was easy to walk along the coast, and there were even proper roads, making it a much easier route than this forest with its dense trees.

“So...they know we’re here?”

“Seems they didn’t fall for my trick with the corpse. They followed our tracks. I’ve given them some lies to throw them off, though.”

I didn’t know whether that man would survive. Ideally, he’d tell his story to a commanding officer and get him to believe my lies.

I also hoped that there’d be two people needed to transport him away from the front line... Though that would only mean three people were gone from a force of two hundred.

“They’re under the assumption that we’re traveling together.”

“Hm? But we are together, right?”

That’s right.

“They don’t have the slightest idea that you’re injured—that’s a special circumstance. If they don’t understand that, they can’t predict what we’ll do. They might make logical decisions, but it won’t fit with our actual behavior. That’s important.”

It meant we could count on the enemy’s predictions being wrong.

If they were combing the coastal region, they must’ve thought we could both walk. If Carol hadn’t been injured, we really *would* have used the road. Horses would’ve caught up to us if we’d done that, so then we would’ve fled into the forest. If we spotted the horses first, there’d be a good chance they’d pass us by. Even if they *did* spot us, horses couldn’t gallop through a forest—the trees would block their path. If our pursuers dismounted and ran after us, it would be a contest of stamina.

“You think so?” Carol sounded unconvinced.

“We’re fine. Everything went well today. If nothing else, we don’t have to worry about what we’re going to eat tomorrow.”

We’d gotten some bad news, but nothing had made our situation any worse. We’d just learned what was going on. We had to force ourselves to stay positive.

“Let’s eat up and get some sleep. Since we’re not making a fire, neither of us needs to keep watch.”

If the enemy had a special task force that could continue searching for us in the forest at night like the royal swords, then we had no chance of escaping anyway. Besides, I wanted Carol awake and alert during the day.

Once we were done eating, we both rested against the same tree, each wearing our own oilpaper poncho.

The sky was unusually dark. The night before, there’d been a new moon, so tonight it would be a crescent.

Why’s it have to be so dark?

Without a fire, it felt like the darkness was swallowing us... Especially in a forest. And it was colder too. Our fires were never very big, but they made all the difference.

The cold penetrated down to my bones. Even after the particularly cold winter we’d had this year, tonight still felt frigid.

My aching legs felt drained of warmth, like the day’s fatigue was being frozen in place.

I might not sleep tonight. I can cope with a night of missed sleep, but what if I can’t sleep tomorrow either? It’ll be at least a few days before we reach the village...

“Awoooooooo!”

Ah, that’s a wolf howling.

I heard a sound like crumpling paper beside me.

She was still awake? I suppose she would be. Even I can’t sleep, and I’m

exhausted.

"If you're worried about wolves, you don't need to be," I assured her.

"Okay."

"I spilled blood when I killed that man. The wolves will head there."

After breaking his neck, I'd cut his carotid artery from behind with my knife. The blood had come gushing out because his heart had still been beating at the time. The wolves would follow the scent to that spot.

"It's not that... I'm cold."

"Ah, that's why... Yeah, it is cold."

Maybe we should start lighting fires again tomorrow, even if it's dangerous.

"Um... C-Can we get closer? It might...save some warmth."

Huh? What's this idiot talking about now? I absentmindedly thought to myself.

But then, I couldn't think of any reason to disagree. It was common practice to huddle up when lost in the mountains in winter. I actually had to wonder why I hadn't had that idea already. My unconscious mind must've held it back.

"Sure. If you're okay with that."

"I don't mind."

"Okay..."

"W-Well...here I go," Carol muttered before shuffling around next to me.

It was so dark that I couldn't see what she was doing.

"Take your oilpaper off," she said.

I did as I was told.

Carol moved closer and groped for my shoulder. I expected her to press her shoulder against mine, but instead she put her hand on my knee and faced me.

"Open your knees."

"O-Okay."

I absentmindedly sat there with my knees drawn up and apart. Carol rested both hands on my knees, then brought her body close to mine. She put her back right against my chest.

I draped the oilpaper back over us. It was just big enough to cover both of us at once.

Carol's body was so cold I didn't feel any heat from her, not even when I held her to my chest. She was chilled down to her very core, so that I felt no warmth.

I found Carol's hands and held them. It was like touching cold pieces of iron. I thought my own hands were cold, but hers were worse. The air must've dried them out too, because they were rough and didn't have any moisture. Still, they were bound to warm up soon if I held them like this.

"Phew..." Carol let out a relaxed sigh. "This is so warm. Maybe we should've done this from the start."

She squeezed my hand.

"No, we shouldn't have," I said.

It's not right.

"Why not? You don't like it?"

"It's not fair on your future husband."

"Pfft... Heh... Ha ha ha." Carol laughed while trying to stop herself. "At a time like this, you're thinking of my future husband? Ha ha..."

"Is that weird?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about it. We need to focus on staying alive."

I guess she's right.

But I was no Buddha—I hadn't rid myself of worldly desires. Even in this situation, I had certain feelings. If Carol had behaved like a pig or if she smelled really bad, things might've been different. But even now, when we were both smelling our worst, her body odor wasn't unpleasant.

That said, I was so worn out by the day's happenings that my urge to rest and sleep was much stronger than my sexual desire.

“Right, but you shouldn’t do things like this with men... Though I realize we don’t have a choice right now.”

“I wouldn’t do this with anyone else. That’d be gross.”

Uhh... What?

“Let’s sleep,” I said, at a loss for any other response.

“All right...”

Now that my body was warmer, my consciousness faded faster than I’d expected. With Carol’s body heat keeping me comfortable, I fell into a deep sleep.

III

The current Count Drain, Pinnock Drain, was meeting with his subordinates in the forest.

Being a count’s family, the Drains were fairly wealthy and owned a large territory, allowing them to have about four hundred soldiers in their employ at all times. Once in a great while, those soldiers would battle with nobles from neighboring territories, but more often, they were dispatched upon the wishes of a more powerful duke. More commonly still, they simply maintained order within Count Drain’s territory.

When a larger force was needed, farmers and serfs within the territory could be recruited to create an army of a thousand men, but they hadn’t gone quite so far this time. Count Drain was here in command of just two hundred soldiers—half of his standing army of four hundred.

The army included a few knights under feudalistic contracts and a constant number of soldiers that were more or less a gathering of ruffians. Keeping the ruffians under employment was a point of pride for a standing army. These were men from poverty-stricken regions who’d otherwise resort to crime to survive. Assembling these men into an army also meant that whenever a band of bandits formed, the two groups of undesirables could be pitted against each other, diminishing them both.

Around the time that guns were becoming prevalent and the nature of war was changing, this method of keeping order had been considered wise and fair, and many nobles had made use of it. Count Drain was one such noble who'd succeeded in raising an army this way.

Though the soldiers of many nobles remained as ruffians, forming armies that weren't much different from bands of bandits, Count Drain's forces had been steadily improved through training since a generation prior.

He had his men wake up at a particular time each morning, train, and then—after being allowed to unwind a little in the evening—they went to bed before it got too late. This orderly lifestyle was combined with some occasional praise intended to instill the men with a sense of pride. This was all it took to make them behave like civilized people. The army's proficiency had gradually improved in this manner.

It was this constant effort that had led to Count Drain's army being selected by Prince Zayeed himself to join an expedition force headed for the northern crusade.

A soldier who wasn't much better than a bandit couldn't be trusted to guard over anyone's supplies. Once such men realized that everything could be stolen and traded for a bag of gold coins, they'd have no qualms about killing a few knights, taking everything, then disappearing. Because of the background of the average soldier, such things did happen from time to time, but Count Drain's army kept its behavior within acceptable limits.

Count Drain's army was divided into two companies, led by knights named Sanja Macatony and Canka Willens, who each had a hundred soldiers under their command. Below them, there were lower-ranking soldiers commanding sub-units of fifty men, twenty men, and ten men.

"Well?" Pinnock urged Sanja to continue.

"We discovered two other settlements in this region, but both were already burned down," Sanja replied.

"Hm." Pinnock nodded in response.

The three men were presently gathered in one such settlement.

It hadn't been destroyed by the Kulati—the Shanti must've taken it upon themselves to do it. Measures like this made it difficult for the invaders; it prevented them from plundering such settlements for food and resources while advancing.

“Any more news? Did you find the devils?”

“No, neither of them,” Sanja replied.

“Hmm... And what about you?” Pinnock turned to Canka.

Canka and Sanja were each in command of a force of one hundred, each one searching different areas of the forest.

“There's at least one devil on the run in my region, sir.”

“Oh?”

Pinnock reacted in his characteristic way. Whenever he heard something that piqued his interest, he would purse his lips. He'd turned thirty-five this year, and the gesture didn't suit him, but it was a habit he couldn't break.

“But it seems he's highly skilled.”

“And this man is one of the devils we're after?”

“Apparently not, sir.”

“He isn't?”

“He attacked one of my men, but spared his life.”

“Oh?”

To Pinnock, that sounded unusual. After all, why would someone being pursued leave one of their pursuers alive?

The truth was that the devil had left the pursuer unable to walk by breaking his leg, meaning several men would have to care for him. That meant that two men from Canka's company had already been taken out of service to care for the injured man. Pinnock didn't know this, however.

“He was threatened with torture, his leg broken as a warning, and told that he'd be spared if he talked. It seems he talked.”

“Hm. You mean to say that this devil is merciful?”

When torturing someone, it was standard to promise to spare their life if they talked, but that didn't mean they'd *actually* be spared. In many cases, a simple promise like that was easily broken. Someone making a promise like that could keep it or break it without it having any effect on their reputation. Only someone honest by nature would feel the need to abide by it. That was Pinnock's assessment.

“I can't be sure about that. From what I've heard, this devil knew nothing about the dragon or the fire.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently, he's a soldier who was part of the losing side during the previous battle. Now he's fleeing.”

“Is he? So there are such soldiers still around.”

Some had fled via the roads, but others were likely to have fled into the forest to avoid pursuit. In fact, it would've been odd if they didn't encounter any soldiers like that.

“But this soldier appears to be incredibly skilled,” Canka continued.

“Oh?”

“He's already killed a squad captain and three soldiers.”

“What?”

“Those following his tracks fall into traps. The squad captain was hit here.” Canka tapped his abdomen with his forearm. “He stood on some sort of rope near the ground that released a bent branch and sent it flying up at him.”

“He shouldn't have died after being hit by a branch.”

“There was an arrow tied to it—an arrow the devil stole from another soldier he'd killed.”

Pinnock's face contorted as he imagined the scene. “Mm... So he died?”

“He did. He took a barbed arrow to the gut.”

“His death is of no matter.” Someone with a knighthood wouldn't be assigned

as captain of a squad of ten. Such jobs were given to ruffians who'd climbed the ranks. If he wasn't a knight, he wouldn't be missed. They'd already faced a similar loss just by fighting against bandits who'd tried to steal their supplies during the journey north. "But if this devil is so skilled, why's he wandering around here?"

"I don't know. Someone with his skill should have escaped long ago. I can't imagine why he's still here."

This was the biggest question.

Under Count Drain's orders, his forces had quickly dispatched horses along the roads to get ahead of the target before searching the forest. But three days had already passed before that order was given, resulting in a fatal delay to their pursuit.

Someone highly trained could walk a significant distance in three days. If this person was still wandering around the local area despite five days having passed since the battle, then he was either very slow, injured, or stupid.

All well-trained soldiers had strong legs, no exceptions. It didn't make sense for this highly skilled enemy soldier to be still here.

"Are you sure his leg isn't injured?"

"I don't believe so. From what I've heard, he can cover ten paces in an instant."

"Hm... But we know he's moving slow."

"He could be sick. Perhaps some sort of stomach illness."

"Hah! A devil with diarrhea!" Pinnock spat, as if this was a stupid idea.

"Given the number of casualties he's caused, his skill is beyond doubt. What would you have us do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Would you have us continue the pursuit?"

Canka would have preferred to let the devil go. The survivors were telling tall tales about it, and he'd already lost one of his squad captains. Fear was

spreading among the soldiers.

Another problem was that only a few of his soldiers were capable of tracking someone. The three killed—two of which had been killed by traps—had all been soldiers with that particular skill. Whoever did the tracking had to walk out in front, so they were always the ones falling prey to traps.

Although tracking wasn't completely impossible without experience, the forest was dark. Anyone passing through would only leave shallow footprints in the blackened residue of leaves lying on the soil, which meant finding those tracks was painstaking work.

All in all, his unit's ability to search the forest was dwindling.

It was still possible to whip the ruffians into persevering, but that could result in more deaths. Given that this was all for one unexceptional devil man, it clearly wasn't worth the cost.

If the devil's throat was crushed, he could be passed off as the target. If that was all they wanted, Canka had heard that many less dangerous devils, too injured to flee the area, had been captured near the sea. Those would suffice. There was no need to chase this highly skilled devil through the forest. They could catch another without all the effort or sacrifices.

"Keep chasing him, of course," Pinnock coldly replied. "This job was assigned to us by Lord Palazzo of the Papal State himself. Prince Zayeed expects much will come of this. It's worth losing ten or twenty soldiers over."

"But as I've said, this devil could merely be a soldier who fled the battlefield."

"I'm not sure how readily we should believe all this about him being an ordinary soldier. And even if he's not the one we want, we need something to show for our efforts. Otherwise, how would you have me explain it to Prince Zayeed? Sanja's men haven't captured a single demon. Isn't that right?"

"That's correct, sir."

Most people wouldn't have chosen a route through the forest where walking was so difficult. Although the enemy's forces had collapsed in the previous battle, their rear guard had done its job. Rather than feeling in all directions, the enemy had made an orderly retreat.

Astonishingly, Sanja's unit hadn't made a single capture while searching half of the region, nor had they spotted any fleeing soldiers. All they'd found were elderly people who'd committed suicide in their own homes.

"Yes, sir, I understand," Canka agreed.

Still, Pinnock's reasoning made some sense.

"See that you don't disappoint. You may leave."



Canka set out by horse and returned to his company the same day.

There were several people waiting in a small camp, which contained a single patched-up tent. Two of them were captains that led fifty-man units. The others were messengers—people who were well-suited to running long distances. They were slim, but not scrawny. Ordinarily, a messenger needed to be a skilled horse rider in order to carry out their tasks safely, but horses were of no use within the forest. What these people needed instead was the stamina to run through the trees. For that reason, Canka had picked out the best long-distance runners and recruited them.

When Canka arrived, everyone stood up from their seats to salute him. "At ease," he said briefly.

They all adopted more relaxed postures. Some sat back down in their seats.

"Lord Pinnock wants that long-eared caught."

"Ugh," one of the unit captains groaned almost inaudibly.

They'd held discussions repeatedly over the past few days, and this captain's opinion was that the target long-eareds had already reached the royal capital after following the coast. Thus, he felt they'd been given a hopeless task the moment they were asked to search the forest. The captain expected it would be difficult work with nothing to show for it.

In Canka's view, that wasn't necessarily the case. But still, the captain's reasoning was perfectly sensible, even if his conclusion had been drawn a little rashly. Given such a pessimistic approach toward the task at hand, it was only natural that the soldiers would feel dissatisfied.

“Relax. I’m going to take direct command of a squad.”

“Huh?”

“We’ll never catch anything while we’re in low spirits. I want each of you to pick out a few useful men under your command and give them to me. Once you’ve done that...you can do as you please.”

“How many will you need?”

“Five men from each of you will be enough. Obviously, prioritize anyone capable of tracking. Then you can both continue to search like before. I’ll focus on the long-eared that’s causing us trouble.”



“Wake up... Wake up.”

I woke up to a voice whispering in my ear.

With her body against mine, Carol had moved her face closer to me inside the poncho and was trying to wake me up. Her face was lit by the moonlight. It was still night, and there were no signs of dawn breaking.

“What’s wrong?”

When I tried to rub my eyes, her body stopped me from moving at all.

“I can smell something,” Carol said.

“A smell?”

We were both quite dirty, so it made sense that we’d both be quite rank.

“It smells like a bonfire. Like something burning...”

I gasped. Fire meant trouble. Suddenly, I was fully awake.

I tried sniffing the air, but the only scent I caught was female body odor. I couldn’t smell burning.

“I don’t smell it. Can we get this off?”

“Okay.”

Once we’d thrown the poncho off, I stood up and moved away from Carol. I tried sniffing the air again, but I still couldn’t sense anything.

Since Carol had demonstrated her sharp senses over these past few days, I couldn't assume she'd simply been mistaken.

"Can you smell it now?" I asked.

"No. But I definitely did a minute ago."

The scent might've gone when the wind direction had changed. The smell of a forest fire wouldn't just vanish, but one of a little bonfire could easily be carried away by the wind.

"When did you notice it? A minute ago?"

"Yeah, a minute ago."

I licked my thumb and checked the wind direction. Even if the wind had changed a little, I'd probably find the fire—if it existed—by heading upwind.

"All right."

I'd better take a look. I was about to say the words out loud, but a nagging feeling stopped me.

The wind was blowing from the same direction I'd come from while carrying Carol. If I walked upwind until I spotted the enemy, I'd be retracing my steps and leaving a double set of tracks. I couldn't do that.

If the enemy began tracking us again the next morning, they'd find the double tracks leading up to their camp, and then it'd be obvious that their target had been watching them the night before. That would make it all too obvious how close we were, and they'd grow even more cautious.

If the enemy were still operating in pairs, then I could hit them with a surprise attack this same night. If they were sleeping, I might even be able to kill them before they could resist. Then my tracks wouldn't even matter. But I couldn't rule out the possibility that five men or more had set up camp together. In that case, there'd be at least one keeping watch. Even if the others were sleeping, I'd struggle to kill them all before anyone could wake up. Then my tracks would be left as a hint to the survivors.

A single mistake could cost us our lives, but I had no choice but to check.

"I'll go take a look. Wait here."

I peered into the darkness. Perhaps it was because the moon had just reappeared after a new moon the night before, but my eyes felt used to it. I could see the ground at my feet.

With a small jump, I landed on a protruding tree root. After repeating the process five or six times, I'd gotten about ten meters from where we'd slept without leaving any footprints. Then I began heading upwind.

After walking about two hundred meters, the scent of the fire was strong enough that I could smell it clearly. Carol hadn't been mistaken.

After walking almost another hundred meters, I saw it.

It was harder to see anything in the shadows now that there was light, so I had to tread very carefully. Once I was close, I concealed myself behind a tree while assessing the situation.

A large number of men—I was able to quickly count twelve—were lying in a clearing. As expected, they were Kulati soldiers.

There was one man standing up on watch, while another was by the fire. The rest were lying around the fire, sealed up in their sleeping bags.

I gripped the bow I'd brought.

The man on watch was wearing armor, but it was merely a few plates that covered his chest and abdomen. His back was exposed, so a hit with a bow would take him down.

The man by the fire, however, was completely protected by full-plate armor. It wasn't the sort of expertly crafted gear that nobles or royalty might wear—it looked more like something made by crudely cutting some pieces out of thin metal sheets using tools. I could see rust here and there, but as shabby as his armor was, metal covered his whole body and would stop any blade.

It was reasonable to assume that he was their captain.

I might've stood a chance with a good bow and some steel arrowheads, but the shortbow and blunt arrowheads I had with me were unlikely to pierce him. He had his helmet off, of course, but I lacked the skill needed to score a precise hit on his head from this distance.

Although killing the captain could throw the others into confusion, I estimated my chance of success to be about ten percent.

Even a ten-percent chance was worth a shot if there was no risk involved, but the risk in this situation was huge. If disturbing the enemy made them charge at me, I knew I'd be able to escape, but it would give them information. They'd know that they'd caught up, and that I was close.

I hated to give up this opportunity, but letting their captain go was the wiser option this time. The smartest way to deal with him was to avoid him entirely.

I pulled my head back behind the tree.

I took out my watch and checked the time in the small amount of light that reached me from the bonfire.

It was 9 p.m. They'd be finished eating and ready to sleep around now.

If they all were sleeping, I could kill all twelve of them, but it looked highly unlikely that they'd all go to sleep with no one on watch.

I'd better leave them.

I silently left the way I came.

"Haah..."

After a little walking, I let out a big sigh.

I wasn't anemic, but the encounter had left me feeling dizzy. It was like my stomach was tied in a knot.

They'd been in the spot we'd passed through the day before. When I'd first found it, I'd considered spending the night there since it was a nice clearing, but then decided to keep walking.

It was clear now that they were tracking us.

And even if I were to attack them at night with perfect timing, I wouldn't be able to defeat them all.

There was also another problem—with Carol on my back, I was slower than they were. They'd catch up tomorrow, or if I was very lucky, they'd catch up the

morning of the day after. Then it would all be over.

This sucks. But I can't die.

I'd always told myself that I'd face death without any regrets if my situation ever became completely hopeless, but I didn't think that way anymore.

If I died, Carol would die too.

I can't die now. I can't lose here. But I will. I'm already cornered.

Despite knowing that I was being tracked, I couldn't carry Carol without stepping on the ground. Carrying her was already a struggle. I wouldn't be able to jump from root to root with her like I'd just done. There was no way to avoid leaving tracks.

As the knowledge sank in that my end was nigh, I felt I could hear death's footsteps approaching. My heart rate increased, my breathing grew heavy, and my hands began to tremble.

No. I shouldn't think about it. Don't be scared. Don't give up now.

There was always hope. Any net that encircled us would always have holes. Our enemies were only human. They were humans, like me, who would make mistakes. I wasn't fighting against gods who always did everything right. There had to be some way to turn the situation around. The question was whether I'd have the insight to see the opportunities before me, and whether I'd have the skill to make use of them.

What mattered was that I couldn't give up as long as some chance of survival, no matter how small, still existed.

If I'd been alone, I would've admitted defeat already. My own life wasn't worth such a desperate struggle. It was something I could easily give up on and throw away at any time.

But Carol's fate was bound to mine. Even if we were beyond all hope, I had to keep going. I couldn't stop until my heart exploded.

As I approached, Carol spotted me and gasped.

"It's me."

I sensed her relax. She must've thought I was an enemy.

"How'd it go?"

"I found them. Twelve men. They've set up camp in the clearing we passed today."

"Okay..." Carol replied without emotion. "Then I guess it's over. Tomorrow..."

"Nothing's over yet. Nothing."

"Really? You've got a plan?"

"Yeah. I thought of it on the way back."

"Going to share it with me?"

Should I tell her? I suppose I should. It'll just worry her if I won't tell her anything.

But Carol's concerns weren't on the level of a child feeling nervous when left home alone. Truth was, things were so bad we might soon have to cut our own throats.

"Okay... I've realized that the reason they're gaining on us is because we have a weakness. That is, we're too slow."

"Yeah... I'm well aware." Carol must've been blaming herself. Her voice sounded like it might dwindle to nothing.

"We need to fix it before we can fight this enemy. If we let them realize our weakness and exploit it, we'll have no chance of winning."

"Okay."

"And I've also figured out that they have a similar weakness."

"They do?"

"Yeah. So if we fix our weakness, we can strike the enemy in theirs. I'm planning to torment them."

"I get it..."

Huh? You get what exactly?

"You're going to leave me somewhere so you can fight, right?"

Oh... She sure is sharp. Ever since the crash, she hasn't just been a burden to me. She's done everything she can along the way.

"Listen, it's all thanks to your good nose. Finding the enemy before they discovered us is a big deal. You've basically saved us. I'm not just saying that."

If we hadn't seen them today, we would've moved at a leisurely pace until we were caught the next day. That really *would've* been the end.

"It's fine," Carol said.

"What is?"

"I know I'm deadweight."

"Deadweight"?

"Listen, I chose to do things this way. You shouldn't blame yourself for anything."

"No, it's my fault."

"I keep telling you it's not."

"No, but..."

Something seemed wrong with her.

"I'm...use-useless... Ugh..." she sobbed.

She's crying?

Then I heard a slapping sound. I couldn't see in the darkness, but I guessed she was hitting her own leg.

"Stop it. What's gotten into you?" I asked, baffled by her behavior.

"If I could just...use this leg..."



“It’s not your fault you’re injured. Hey.”

I crouched down and grabbed Carol’s arm in the darkness. I wouldn’t have known what to do next if she’d struggled free, but Carol simply relaxed.

“If I could use my leg...I could fight too...” Carol lamented through her sobbing.

I knew just how she felt. I’d hate it just as much if the situation were reversed. If I couldn’t use all the skills I’d learned, I’d have to rely on her to protect me.

I didn’t think of her as baggage, though. I might’ve felt that way if she was someone I didn’t think was worth protecting, but I definitely didn’t feel that way about her.

“I know... But it doesn’t bother me so much.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m risking my life out here. And risking it to protect you doesn’t feel so bad. I’m surprised at myself.”

“Huh...?”

I hoped my words would help put her at ease, that they would put her mind at rest.

“Anyway, we’ll talk later. There’s a ton of things to do tonight. I’ve got to start now.”

IV

When my work was over and I returned to Carol, dawn was already breaking.

“Yuri.” Carol lifted her head as she trembled in the cold.

I’d warmed up while I was walking around, but Carol had spent the night exposed to the wind with no bonfire. I doubted she’d slept at all.

I dropped the items I’d been carrying down on the ground. They weren’t important—just things I’d been carrying to give me more weight.

My weight would be reduced by more than half if I wasn’t carrying Carol or

anything else. I'd reasoned it would arouse suspicion if my footprints suddenly became shallower.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Yeah. Thirty minutes ago. I heard someone shout."

"Okay."

I was surprised that my heart didn't beat faster. I accepted the situation, and I was relaxed to just the right degree.

My hands weren't shaking anymore—being too tense would overstimulate my nerves and make it harder to control my muscles. When hands trembled, it was because the nerves were soaked in stimulants that made the muscles move by themselves. Maybe I would've had superhuman strength, like someone escaping a fire, but I wouldn't be capable of precise movements.

Fortunately, I didn't have that problem at that moment. I was able to control my movements accurately. Maybe it was a consequence of resigning myself to fate, but it was convenient at any rate.

"Sorry, but I'm going to need your dagger too," I said.

"Okay."

"I'll leave my knife with you instead." I passed Carol the knife I used for cooking. It had a short blade, and it wasn't particularly well-forged, but it would be good enough for committing suicide if it came to that.

I stared at Carol for a moment, but said nothing. Carol looked back at me, confused. I'd been about to say something to her, but couldn't find the words.

"See you."

In the end, I couldn't think of anything special to say, so I just gave her those two simple words and a wave of my hand.

"Okay... Good luck."

I walked off without looking back.

I did my best to keep my footsteps silent as I left Carol and headed back to where we'd slept the night before.

During the night, I'd carried Carol off in a random direction before leaving her in the place where she was now. With a torch I'd made in one hand, I'd carefully erased my footprints with my other hand as I made my way back. Then I'd walked back through the forest to our original location again.

If there hadn't been any footprints at all, they would've searched more carefully for the ones I'd tried to erase. But if they found a set of clear footprints leading them forward, they'd have no reason to search for any others.

Our pursuers would follow them and find the place where we'd slept. They'd know that we'd put our belongings down and spent the night there.

It had worked—there were now several tracks along the trail that I'd deliberately left during the night. If they hadn't fallen for those, they would've found Carol already.

To serve as a sort of warning alarm, I'd left a trap for them. As I sneaked closer to it, I saw the evidence that someone had been caught in it.

First, there was a line of thin, twisted cord that went from one tree to another at knee-height. It looked like they'd all stepped over it. Perhaps they'd left it in place, worrying that they might trigger the trap by cutting it. But that cord was really just a tripwire that did nothing more than make people fall over. The real trap was the hole they'd step into as they avoided the tripwire.

I'd dug a small hole with the shovel, placed an arrow in it, then covered the whole thing with leaves and branches. Anyone stepping into it would have their foot impaled by the arrowhead. Since they'd be stepping over the rope, they'd be walking with a large stride and putting their foot down heavily, making it hard for them to immediately shift their weight back to their rear foot.

There was fresh blood in the soil where someone had clearly stood in one of the two holes I'd made. I could tell from the patch of disturbed ground that they'd fallen over and rolled around on the ground after standing in it. They must've noticed the other hole before anyone had stumbled into it, because both the material covering it and the arrowhead had been cleared away.

Well, I'd never expected them to be dumb enough to stand in *both*. The reason I'd made two holes was to account for whichever foot someone put

down first. I'd expected one of them would be a dud.

The arrowhead that hadn't been stood on might've been thrown away somewhere, but I couldn't find it. The other, however, was lying close by on the ground, covered in blood. I wiped it off with a rag, then put it away with my belongings. I also retrieved the cord.

I looked at the footprints again and noticed there was some blood in them. The person who'd gotten injured was walking with the rest. A tight bandage on the wound was probably all they had on them to stop the bleeding. It obviously wasn't perfect, because there were marks—like bloody stamps—left in the footprints.

I followed the tracks.

After I'd walked a few hundred meters, I found someone. He was sitting on the ground by himself, slumped against a tree. Blood was flowing from his right foot, forming a puddle on the ground. The others must've helped him with his injured foot for a while, but then given up and left him.

Even if the wound was sewn up properly, he still wouldn't be able to walk after the damage the arrowhead had done to the sole of his foot. It would be even harder for him if the only treatment he got was a bandage to slow the bleeding. A person's blood pressure would drop if they lost a liter of blood. Losing two liters would kill them. Walking on a foot with a fresh, open wound would quickly lead to dangerous levels of blood loss. He probably wouldn't die, but he looked like he was already getting light-headed. His face appeared pale too.

"Looks like they left you behind," I said in Terolish as I approached.

The man—I estimated was in his thirties—raised his head and looked at me.

My ears were hidden, and I was wearing the clothing I'd stolen from the dragon rider. Though the design was unusual, it was clothing made by the Kulati—they looked nothing like anything found in Shiyalta.

This wouldn't be too suspicious, since their army was a mixture of forces from different places. If anything, he would likely become suspicious because I was

too young to be a soldier.

But he didn't seem wary of me at all. He looked at me like a man on the verge of death greeting his messiah. "That's right," he said. "Think you could help me out?"

"Sure. That's why I'm here," I replied.

The man relaxed and let his head hang down once more.

I drew closer and loosened my dagger in its sheath.

"Are you all right? Look at me," I said.

The moment the man lifted his head, I plunged the blade into the side of his neck. I felt barely any resistance as the fine, well-sharpened blade cut through the man's throat.

"Uoh... Kah."

The flat part of my dagger's blade was blocking his windpipe. I couldn't let him cry out now—there was a good chance that some of his friends would be close enough to hear him.

"Nh..."

The man reached for his sword in an attempt to attack me, but he couldn't draw it. I was holding it down by the pommel with my left hand so that he couldn't unsheathe it.

When he realized he wouldn't be able to draw the sword, he grabbed my arm instead, trying to resist me with all his strength. But he'd lost a lot of blood, and now he couldn't even breathe, so he was weak. His life soon slipped from him completely without too much of a struggle.

To be sure, I waited ten more seconds before pulling out the dagger. There was no spurt of blood—his heart had already stopped—but whatever had collected in his throat came spilling out the moment I withdrew my weapon.

Robbing a corpse felt a little wrong, but I searched the man's body for useful items as soon as I could.

First, I took his sword. I was more accustomed to using a dagger, but both the

daggers I had featured designs from the Shiyalta Kingdom. Carrying his weapon would make me less suspicious.

I took his sword from its scabbard and confirmed that it was double-edged. Though it was slightly shorter than most, the breadth and thickness were standard, making it unexceptional. If I had to classify it, I'd call it a short sword.

I'd trained in the use of daggers with curved blades, so this double-edged straight blade was far from familiar to me. I began to lose interest in it as I tested the blade against the ground to see how much it would flex.

It didn't bend at all.

I felt the blade creaking under my arm, as if it was no more than a stack of box cutter blades. The iron used in the sword must've been heated red hot, dropped into cold, winter water, then retrieved and sharpened. It likely hadn't been processed any further.

It was unreliable. If this thing were to be hit with a tough steel spear wielded by Dolla, it would snap in half like a dry branch. I hadn't expected much from it, but I'd thought their swords would be better than this.

I checked his other belongings.

The bag worn over his shoulder contained some food, and the pouch tied around his waist contained rifle supplies, for some reason. The man didn't have a rifle, and I couldn't find one nearby either.

The pouch contained a bag of lead pieces and a bag of gunpowder. The lead pieces could be melted down to make bullets.

The tool for making the bullets was sort of like a sandwich press, except the hollow part was shaped like a round ball rather than a sandwich. It wasn't particularly big—I could've carried it around in one hand.

A gun's caliber wasn't made to some specific number of millimeters to meet industry standards, so it would be inefficient to give all the soldiers ready-made bullets. Since all the guns had different calibers, the bullets might end up being too big to fit in the barrel, or too small to be fired properly. For that reason, each gun was paired with a tool set that matched its caliber, and soldiers were given lead scraps. That meant each soldier could make ammo for their firearm

by melting the scraps. Lead could be melted using a bonfire, since its melting point was only about three hundred degrees Celsius.

In addition to the sandwich press-like mold, soldiers also used a tool that looked like a ladle. The lead could be heated while in the ladle, then poured into the mold to make the bullets.

The man only had the lead pieces—he didn't have any equipment to make ammunition. They must've been taken from him, since those tools were always kept with the gun. If they'd left his lead and gunpowder behind, they must've had more than enough of those already. Now I could assume that the enemy had at least two guns.

For an instant, I felt my heart grow heavy. But I recovered quickly; I wouldn't linger on dark thoughts. If this man had been carrying these items up till now, then I could assume that he was one of their riflemen. The soldier who'd taken his gun from him wasn't necessarily trained to use it.

And now I had some gunpowder. Maybe I'd find some use for it. Guns weren't the only thing gunpowder could be used in. Simply burning a pinch of it would create enough heat to produce a burn on bare skin. It could also momentarily blind someone.

I thought for a little while. After about five minutes, I came up with an idea.

I searched the man's things again and found exactly what I was looking for—a copper plate. It was covered in scratches and some green spots that suggested it often got polished harshly.

I knew he'd have one. Armies generally used metal tableware. Any earthenware in their packs would crack before long, and thick wooden plates would be too bulky.

I'd be able to make something useful with this.

I picked up the straight sword I'd given up on a moment ago and walked a short distance away. I was looking for a rocky surface. I soon found a small boulder, about the size of a human head, poking out from the ground.

I also found another stone small enough to hold in my hand and lay the sword down on the boulder. With the sword between the two rocks, I easily broke it in

two.

When shards of metal flew in all directions, I realized that my method had been dangerous—I would've regretted it if a shard had flown into my eye. Even getting them inside my clothing would've been painful.

I went back to the man's body. I didn't want to remove his clothing, so I took the bag that he'd been carrying and dumped out all the items inside. It was made of tough cloth, so I knew that flying pieces of metal wouldn't penetrate it so easily.

I returned to the rock and wrapped the bag around the sword so the pieces wouldn't go flying off. With that, I whacked the sword again and again. Once I was done, I wrapped the fragments in the bag, which was now full of holes, and carried them back.

After returning to the body, I used the fragment of the sword still attached to the handle to carve a straight groove into the copper plate. I did this repeatedly until the groove had the depth I wanted. With that done, I lined up the rest of the metal debris on the plate.

I took a pinch of gunpowder from the pouch and rubbed it into a narrow cutting of cloth to create a makeshift fuse. I put one end of it inside the gunpowder pouch, then put the whole thing on the plate.

Suddenly I realized that I should put the lead pieces in there too—they could work like shrapnel just as they were.

Just as I was about to do that, however, I stopped after a little thought. I decided to add just a few of them instead. I worried that they might absorb too much of the energy if they were too heavy to fly well. If they were stopped by someone's skin before they could even reach the flesh, they'd serve no purpose.

Finally, I forcefully bent the copper plate in two along the groove I'd made, pinning the fuse in place. I'd made a sandwich of gunpowder, iron scraps, and lead pieces inside copper. It had taken a long time, but it was worth it.

Now I had to hurry.

During the night I'd gone farther ahead along this path.

I'd set a trap at the end point, then returned by stepping in my own tracks—a technique known as backtracking. Some wild animals used it to hide the location of their nest from predators.

After doing this for almost a hundred meters, I grew so tired that I veered off to the side instead, though I still made sure to conceal my footprints.

If I'd simply followed an O-shaped path back to Carol, the enemy would follow it, so I'd made it P-shaped instead. I'd already gone beyond the branch point. That meant there couldn't be more than a hundred meters of tracks left to follow.

The enemy's footprints continued going forward beyond the branch point, suggesting they hadn't noticed my backtracking.

Just as I was approaching the end of my tracks, however, I saw someone's back through a gap in the trees. The enemy had already finished following them to their end.

Since the tracks ended here suddenly, they were searching the area. There was nothing else to follow, so soon they'd begin going back and looking for the branching tracks that I'd covered up.

I hid myself and watched them closely.

Now then...

I'd seen twelve enemy soldiers when scouting the night before. With one gone, that left eleven. I couldn't see all of them from my hiding place behind the tree, but five were within my field of view, so it was possible that they'd all gathered in this area. There didn't seem to be a detachment operating elsewhere.

They appeared to have put down all their gear, except for armor, while they searched the area where the tracks ended. One stood out from the rest—he was having his subordinates carry his things while he wore heavy-plate armor.

Until now, I'd been thinking that my handmade bomb would likely be enough to take out all eleven of them, but since they weren't on the move, they

weren't all clustered together. They'd all spread out a little, over an area with a radius of about seven meters, while searching for footprints.

That was a problem. Since they were so dispersed, I'd only manage to kill one or two, even if I threw my bomb perfectly. I knew my makeshift weapon wouldn't cause harm across a radius of ten meters.

If they'd been spread farther apart, I could've attacked them one at a time with my bow, but they were gathered too closely for that. If one of them got hit, his screams would soon alert the others and they'd all charge at me. The way they were positioned made them incredibly difficult to deal with.

What now...?

I spent two or three minutes thinking, but no good ideas came to mind. I'd be at a disadvantage attacking them face-on, but stealthily picking them off wasn't easy either.

That said, I didn't have Carol with me, so I could run off into the forest faster than they could keep up. My plan from the start was to escape if I found myself at a disadvantage. The enemy soldiers would spread out due to differences in how fast they could run, allowing me to fight them one at a time.

Well, I can only think of one way to get everyone to gather together. Let's give it a shot.

The idea I had in mind wouldn't work if my equipment was obviously Shanti-made, so I'd have to leave my spear behind. To make sure I could easily grab it while running away, I hid it behind a tree that I marked with my dagger.

After a little thought, I also put down the broken sword. I thought it might help my disguise if I left it in its scabbard, but I decided against it since it was the sword of the man I'd just killed. My disguise would be blown if anyone recognized the scabbard's design and color.

It left me feeling less confident, but I only took my dagger and bow and arrows with me. Since I'd shortened the spear, it was only about as long as a sword blade anyhow.

I stepped out from the trees, trying to act as naturally as possible.

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I walked out and saw enemies, their backs turned to me.

I was close enough for some of them to notice me, but I couldn't show any fear. Appearing confident was crucial to this plan.

When I thought about the bow and arrows on my back, it felt like a wasted opportunity. Even now, I was wondering whether I should give up on using the bomb and instead kill one or two of them from a distance.

A mature man who was studying the ground behind the rest of the group was the first to notice me.

"Hm?!" He reacted like I was an unexpected sight.

I had cloth wrapped around my head, of course, so at a glance I didn't look like a Shanti.

"Looks like I finally caught up." I said in Terolish. "You must be the ones chasing the demon."

"Uh? Yes, but...?"

"Where's your leader?" I asked.

"Leader?"

Oh crap, that's not the reaction I expected. I guess that's not the natural way to say it.

"Um, commander," I said, correcting myself.

"Oh, the commander. Who are you anyway?"

Okay, commander must be the right word. I guess they don't use the "leader" in this context. That was close. There's no going back now, but they're going to see through me before long.

"I'm acting under orders from Epitaph Palazzo of the Papal State. I'm with the Volunteer Knight Order."

I knew that a man named Epitaph was here as a representative of the Papal State. The reason I'd said I was from there was because of the dialect I was

speaking. Terolish had many variations, and the one I'd been taught by Ms. Ether was from Vaticanus, her birthplace. I had to say I was from the Papal State or my act wouldn't be convincing.

"O-Oh. Please forgive me."

"It's fine."

Oh man. It feels like I'm being too straight with him. It doesn't fit the character I'm trying to play. On top of that, I'm clearly just a boy. A little thought is going to make it obvious that something doesn't add up. Oh well... I just have to make sure I run away if I need to.

"Captain!" the man yelled.

The man in plate armor turned toward us.

Though his head was covered by a helmet, the visor on the front was raised. I had no idea how it felt to wear such a thing, but I guessed he'd barely be able to see if he kept the visor down all the time. I had to hope he'd keep it raised, or I'd have a hard time fighting him.

A spear—even a small handheld one with a conical tip—might penetrate through his armor, but he'd be protected against curved blades designed for slashing and cutting like my dagger.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Someone from the Papal State is here... I think he's a messenger."

"I see."

"Well met." I bowed to him in the style of the Kulati as taught to me by Ms. Ether. With my left hand on the right side of my chest, I moved my right hand with a characteristic sweeping movement while lowering my head.

The captain looked puzzled by my gesture.

Oh, crap.

It felt like I was debating with an expert after a few minutes of research. I'd convinced myself I was rather knowledgeable about the Papal State after learning so much from Ms. Ether. Now I wasn't so sure.

After a little hesitation, the captain returned the same gesture, albeit with some awkwardness.

Anyone who was well-off enough to be wearing plate armor had to be low-level nobility at the very least. Greetings like this should've been an everyday occurrence for him. It shouldn't have felt awkward.

I'd misunderstood something somewhere. Maybe it was a greeting used at social events, or in the imperial court, rather than one used by officers in the field. It might've been unfamiliar to nobles who weren't from a big city.

"Well met. My name is Canka Willens," he introduced himself.

I'd better give him a name in response. There's so much to think about.

I quickly came up with a false name. "My apologies. I'm Huguenot Francis of the Volunteer Knight Order. I'm here under orders from Lord Palazzo."

My best bet was to keep playing the role of a stuck-up youngster. I figured it would work because I'd heard from Ms. Ether that nobles in the Papal State tended to throw their weight around.

"What business brings you here, sir?"

"First, I'd like you to tell me how the search for the demon goes. What progress have you made?"

"All is going smoothly. I'm confident that we'll be able to offer up his head within the next two or three days."

Despite finding me odd, he wasn't at all wary. And no wonder—I could speak Terolish. It mustn't have occurred to him that the Shanti he was chasing after happened to be a Terolish speaker. It was probably about as likely as bumping into someone with blonde hair in Sibiak.

"Be specific. What are you doing right now? It looks to me like you've come to a halt." I already knew the answer to my own question.

"We're following his footprints, but they came to a stop here. Now we've begun searching for their continuation." It was a surprisingly honest answer. He showed no desire to put on airs or exaggerate their progress as he spoke to me, maybe because I was merely here as a messenger.

Most importantly, he'd told me they'd "begun searching," not "been searching." That meant he must've just gotten here. I'd spent longer than anticipated making my bomb, so I'd assumed they'd had a long time to search for tracks.

"Hm. Then the demon must have realized that you're in pursuit."

"I'm...not sure."

"I found you by following your tracks, and I saw no signs that you'd had to spread out like this to look for the demon's tracks before. It seems to me that this is a first."

As soon as I said it, this captain named Canka looked like he'd had a moment of realization.

"Which means he knows you're in pursuit and he's covering his tracks," I continued. "Or perhaps he's hiding nearby, planning a surprise attack."

"You think so? I suspect he continued on ahead and we simply lost the trail."

Yeah, that's possible. It makes sense. This is getting tricky.

I'd thought my plan was worth a shot, but now that I was talking to the guy, I wish that I'd watched a little longer. After letting them waste a good while searching, I could've appeared and offered them some much-needed help in the form of a new weapon. By that point, they would've been ready to listen, and my theory that the enemy was hiding in preparation for a counterattack would've been more easily accepted. Unfortunately, they probably hadn't been searching for even thirty minutes. I wasn't going to sound convincing when they hadn't even spent half an hour searching. They weren't ready to consider other possibilities yet.

As things stood, they'd be inclined to continue their search, hoping that they'd catch the trail again in a short while. But I couldn't back down now.

"Perhaps. But have you looked in the trees?" I suggested. "If he climbed into the trees, his tracks would've disappeared."

We both looked up. Although the trees had lost most of their leaves, they were so densely packed that it would've been hard to spot anyone who'd

climbed up high.

Scampering up into the trees then waiting for the pursuers to pass was a realistic plan. I hadn't tried it myself, because I'd have been defenseless against their arrows if they'd spotted me up there, but it wouldn't be strange behavior for a hunted man who felt he was out of options.

"I wonder..." Canka was neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

He must've still doubted me. He stopped short of expressing his doubts out loud to avoid an argument with me, but I knew he wasn't convinced. He wasn't going to obey if I told him to have all his men search the treetops.

I'd imagined having them all climb into the trees so that I could fight Canka alone on the ground. Then his men would likely hurt themselves trying to get back down quickly. But that wasn't going to happen.

This guy must be really sure of his own beliefs. I can't get him to change his mind. It's hard to lead him on.

"In that case, we may need the weapon Lord Palazzo gave me."

"Hm?"

I took out my homemade grenade. "This."

Canka eyed it with suspicion.

"It produces smoke from charcoal laced with a potent substance. It'll release a gas that's poisonous to demons. It causes so much discomfort to any nearby demons that you'll immediately know where they are."

"I see..."

"Have your men gather," I instructed.

"But why?"

"When the demon leaps out, we all need to be ready for him. If everyone is too spread out, he might be able to escape."

"Hmm..."

He fell silent. Something about the idea didn't convince him.

Okay, fair enough. That sounded a bit weak.

I wasn't ready to give up. I knew it was possible to convince him that the idea was worth a try—all the more so when the suggestion was coming from someone who was (supposedly) from an influential country like the Papal State.

"But won't the poison be harmful to humans too?" he asked.

So that's his fear.

Although I'd said that the gas was highly toxic to the Shanti only, it was only natural to expect it to be at least a *little* harmful to Kulati too. It was similar to how an agricultural chemical that killed insects only would also be harmful people in high enough doses. He can't have liked the idea of getting all his men in one spot so that they'd all be exposed to it at once.

His objection was very reasonable. My lies weren't working as well as I'd hoped.

"Strictly speaking, it's not actually a poison. It creates an odor that long-eareds hate so much they struggle to breathe. To us it's more like...a strong smell of fragrant wood burning."

It'll just smell a bit. Just a smell, that's all.

"Hm..."

"Now you know it's safe, gather up your men. Lord Palazzo isn't known for his patience."

He could be for all I know... But I've got to pressure him somehow.

"Very well," Canka agreed after a little thought, then he called out to his men. "Gather round!"

All of Canka's soldiers heard his order and came over.

One, two, three... Okay, that's all eleven.

I once again confirmed that they weren't well-armored. All of them had identical helmets that looked like rusty iron bowls, but they wore clothes with different colors. They had leather chest protectors, but that was the extent of their armor. Simple markings were painted on their chest pieces with white

paint, presumably so they'd be identifiable as friendlies in the chaos of a battle.

It was clear that no one had spent money to get these soldiers the best equipment and training. They were more like a militia.

Now that they'd gathered, I was ready to light the bomb. I took out my lighter.

"Oh...? What's that?" Canka pointed to the lighter.

"I received it from Lord Palazzo. Items like this are highly fashionable right now."

I had to keep making things up.

"From Lord Palazzo himself? I envy you."

"Yes, I treasure it."

"By the way..."

Hm?

"Where'd you get those clothes?" Canka asked.

Uh-oh...

"I was given them to wear as camouflage."

Now my acting skills were being tested. I was wearing the clothing that I'd gotten from the dragon rider, which was poorly tailored. No noble would wear something like this, even on a battlefield.

"I couldn't help but notice they look like something from a dragon kingdom. Same goes for the crest on your shoulder."

Ah... Now I've blown it.

It was all blatantly from the Entak Dragon Kingdom—a nation that practiced Kokorlism—which meant there was no way they could've come from any nations of Yeesusdom, let alone the Papal State.

Aside from the traditional turban, the dragon rider's clothes hadn't been so different from those of the pursuers I'd killed, so I'd figured the design would be close enough to what people wore in the Terolish-speaking regions. But to the

trained eye, it turned out it wasn't so convincing.

I've got myself into a real mess.

As the name suggested, the Entak Dragon Kingdom was a nation where people tamed dragons. If they'd already figured out the true identity of the dragon rider's body—and given that he was likely the only soldier who'd joined the crusade wearing such clothing—then it was easy to conclude that I was the Shanti they were chasing based on the fact that I was now wearing his attire.

But they couldn't prove their suspicions yet. There was a lot of good circumstantial evidence against me, but no absolute proof. Though the case against me was strong, they couldn't cut down a (self-proclaimed) messenger from the Papal State on circumstantial evidence alone. They'd be taking a risk.

"Hm. It sounds as though you distrust me."

"I mean no disrespect, but yes."

Despite being suspicious, he'd actually agreed to gather his men. He must've concluded that no matter what the grenade in my hand turned out to be, it would never pose a direct threat.

Common sense told him that I'd need to start a fire before I could light the fuse. Alternatively, I might've had something that was already lit with me, such as a match cord, but using something like that to ignite the fuse would be difficult. He hadn't realized that the lighter I was holding could light the fuse in an instant.

"Forgive me, but could I ask that you remove your hood so as to alleviate my suspicions?"

I figured he'd ask. That's the quickest way to be sure, and there's no way I can refuse.

"Very well... Though I'd prefer if we don't waste too much time on this."

I lifted my hand to the hood that was covering my ears. As I ripped it off, my hair was lifted up with it.

"Is this good enough?" I asked while opening the lighter.

"Hold on... I can't see."

Of course you can't. I'd be done for if you could.

I'd rubbed soot from a burned-down torch over the top half of each ear. Since I had black hair that was long around my ears, they'd have a hard time recognizing the points of my blackened ears at a glance, even if they poked out from my hair.

"That's enough. Now step back," I said.

I used the lighter's flint and steel to produce a flame, then held it to the fuse.

"Hold on a moment," Canka demanded.

Now it was a test of his decision-making. I prayed he'd turn out to be indecisive in the face of danger.

"I removed the head covering like you asked. It's about time you listened to me. I've shown you my ears. What more do you need to see? What's next, my ass?"

As I spoke quickly to maintain the charade, I prayed that the fuse would light easily.

"Stop that immediately!"

Canka noticed the lighter and tried to grab my hand as the fuse ignited and began to make its characteristic sizzling sound.

I took a step back, acting like I was just dodging his hand, but then I spun around while releasing the makeshift bomb with an underarm throw.

The bomb went between Canka's legs and landed just behind him. It was now lying right in the middle of his subordinates.

They must've thought it was just a squabble between us. They were all too confused to realize what was happening.

"Gah..." Canka turned around and looked at my makeshift bomb.

If he tries to pick it up, should I stop him?

"What are you getting so aggressive for? Has the time you've spent dawdling on this mission had an effect on your brain?"

I was taunting him. The longer I could keep him confused, the better.

I wouldn't be hit by the blast or the shrapnel because Canka was between me and the bomb. The question was how long I'd have to wait before it exploded; it wasn't going to happen in an instant.

I made sure I was ready to start running at any moment.

Canka suddenly issued an extreme order to his men. "Someone lie on that thing! I don't care who!"

It was a rational demand, and probably the best instruction he could've given in this situation. But if anyone actually obeyed, I'd be in trouble.

Unfortunately, his subordinates still believed the explanation I'd given and thought the item couldn't be at all dangerous. They'd have no reason to fear it. Any one of them might throw themselves over it without knowing they were sacrificing their own life.

Indeed, one of the men—he must've been well-disciplined—was about to do just that.

Crap.

"Stop! You'll die!" I shouted.

The soldier who'd been about to follow orders stopped.

It worked, I thought.

Then a sword came flying at my face like a gust of wind. I bent backward to dodge it without a moment's hesitation.

"Whoa." I instinctively rubbed the bridge of my nose. I hadn't been cut.

"Tell me. What do you mean, he'll die?" Canka asked.

"I meant it figuratively. He could burn himself."

At this point, I couldn't wait to give up the terrible act. The problem was that the bomb hadn't exploded yet.

There was a chance it had been a dud, but I wanted to give it a little longer. If I ran now, leaving the bomb behind, they'd chase after me. Then it might blow up when there was no one near, achieving nothing but a little noise in the forest.

I decided it was better to hold my ground and keep everyone here.

At any rate, it was about time I drew my dagger to defend myself. I removed my familiar weapon from its sheath.

“You drew your weapon first. How will you explain yourself to Lord Palazzo?” I demanded.

It was a ridiculous line. I shouldn’t have cared, but it felt painfully obvious I had nothing to rely on other than the name Palazzo.

“We’re done talking,” Canka replied.

He’d made up his mind to kill me. If he killed a messenger and buried them, it would simply be assumed the messenger had never arrived—there was a war going on, after all. Canka could just claim, “The messenger never got here. He must have died on the way.” Even if he went so far as to kill his eleven subordinates to silence them, he’d probably get away with it.

“Then let’s fight one-on-one,” I said.

“What?”

“Oh? Don’t tell me you can’t handle a lone foot soldier with nothing but a tiny little blade?”

Canka just looked at me.

I hadn’t given up talking my way through this.

What worried me most was that he might order his men to surround me. If they moved toward me, the bomb would become meaningless.

That said, it had been a while now without an explosion, so it was starting to look like the bomb was a dud after all. I couldn’t bet everything on it going off.

Canka said nothing to his subordinates. Instead, he resumed his fighting stance, tightly gripping the large handle of his double-edged sword, which was over a meter long.

“Ngh!”

Canka handled the longsword like it weighed no more than a small branch as he slashed at me. The sword’s point swiped with a speed that didn’t seem to

match its apparent weight.

I'd thought Canka's attack had been a slash aimed at my chest, but he turned it into an upward swing in an instant. And he didn't stop there—he swung at me with one slashing attack after another.

Oh crap. This guy's way more dangerous than I thought.

I broke into a cold sweat as it dawned on me that he was a skilled swordsman. I couldn't help but take two, then three steps back as I dodged each of his attacks.

Unlike Soim, he hadn't achieved his strength through perfecting his technique, but he definitely had more skill than any of our spear instructors at the Knight Academy. He was clearly the strongest enemy I'd ever faced. If I wasn't careful, he'd cut me down in an instant.

There was nothing I could do to fight back. All the experience I'd gained up to now told me so. Our weapons were far too mismatched.

If he'd been wielding something a little heavier, like an axe or a hoko yari—an ancient Japanese spear—for example, I could've gotten closer to him with some agile movement. Unfortunately, his attacks were coming too fast, and he remained far beyond the reach of my dagger.

Canka didn't let up. He kept the pressure on, forcing me to keep moving backward. I couldn't let him push me any further.

I gave my dagger a half-turn spin in my right hand, switching into an underhand grip. An underhand grip on my dagger would make it easier to redirect his attacks. If I tried to stop his slashes with my dagger's blade, it would shatter in an instant.

Getting close to him without blocking any of his ceaseless, precise attacks was going to be difficult. Although each slash had enough weight behind it to kill someone, some carried more heft than others. This wasn't something I consciously considered—it was like an instinctive understanding I'd gained through experience.

Canka was holding his sword with his right hand positioned above his left hand. It was a type of grip suited for raising the sword high, then swinging it

downward with a lot of force behind it. He could deliver powerful diagonal chest slashes from the right too. However, if he tried to follow up the attack with another slash from the left, it wouldn't carry as much power. It was a human limitation that came from always having a forehand and backhand.

I moved my upper body back a little to avoid a sweeping slash that aimed for my face, then stepped closer. When he thrust his sword toward me with both arms, it met my dagger, which I held with an underhand grip in my right hand. The blade of his longsword slid across the edge of my dagger, sending out a shower of sparks until our hilts collided with a clang that sent a shock running up my arm.

He'd stopped. But an instant later, the force against my dagger vanished. I instinctively shifted my hand so that the blade rested against my upper arm to guard myself.

In many fighting styles, a standard response to being blocked by the hilt was to pull back while attempting to cut the opponent's hand. I could predict what movements he'd make, and I used the opportunity to step forward again.

After I'd blocked his attempt to cut my hand, he positioned his sword horizontally and slashed at my neck. I moved two steps closer as I ducked to avoid it. That should have put him within striking distance, but my dagger didn't have much more reach than my fist because I was holding it with an underhand grip.

I released my hold on my blade and threw it.

A dagger thrown from the grip I'd had it in would have no speed or power behind it. Regardless, there was no one alive who wouldn't flinch at the sight of a sharpened blade flying toward their face, and I only needed him to cower for a moment.

The dagger spun toward his face. He struck it away, blocking his view for a moment. I used the chance to draw Carol's dagger, which had been hidden in my inner pocket.

I charged in and reached out, as if trying to claw at his face, but he dodged me. He knew to take a large step back and avoid my attack despite his vision being blocked.

I'd finally been able to advance toward him, but there was nothing I could do to stop him from simply moving back.

"Phew..."

Let's try something else.

Since we were fighting outdoors, he had unlimited space, allowing him to retreat as much as he needed—much like I'd just done. In close-quarters combat, moving backward was a simple method that would allow him to dodge just about any attack.

Still, forcing Canka to move back had been a good outcome. It was what I'd hoped for, in fact.

I switched to an undergrip with Carol's dagger.

"Not bad," Canka said.

"Didn't you say we were done talking?" I stayed on my guard as I gave him an unoriginal comeback.

"Not going to pick up the dagger you just threw?"

"What about you? Not going to shield your face?"

Canka still had his helmet's faceguard raised. He'd never gotten the chance to lower it. Doing so was a clear indication of an intention to fight. If he'd put it down before his initial attack, he would've lost the element of surprise. After slashing at me without warning, he hadn't found a good opportunity to lower it.

Now that his hostility toward me was obvious, there was no need to leave the face guard up. However, doing so would mean taking a hand away from his sword, creating an opening for me.

I knew that if I picked up the dagger, he'd leisurely lower his face guard and the one gap in his armor would disappear.

"No."

"How about we make a deal? Let me go and I'll give you my right ear," I suggested in an attempt to buy some more time.

It wasn't a serious offer. I'd be happy to give him my right ear if it meant he'd

let me escape, but I'd have no guarantee that he'd stop his pursuit. I wouldn't miss my ear if losing it gave me a chance to get out of a situation as bad as this one, but in reality, the only difference would be the blood loss I'd suffer as a result. If he broke his promise and continued chasing us, I'd be weakened, making it harder to fight once cornered. I'd already thought through the idea of making a deal and ruled it out.

"No can do," he replied.

In any case, I'd gotten Canka to take some steps back, and now he was hesitant to attack me again. However, despite my success in pushing him back, everything still depended on the bomb behind him, which still hadn't exploded.

I'd better give up on that thing. Sadly, it hasn't worked.

Not everything in life went according to plan; I had to accept that. And if the bomb was a dud, then there was no reason to take risks to push him back further.

"Why not?" I asked.

Another option was to pick up my dagger. I could grab it, then run away. Canka wouldn't catch me. Equipment came with advantages and disadvantages. While plate armor was undeniably strong, running after someone while wearing a full set just wasn't possible.

"I'm going to hand over your head. You've done too much to anger the Papal State."

I couldn't help but tsk. *Angered who? That guy named Epitaph, I bet. He must be the type to bear a grudge.*

"You've got some skill for someone your age," Canka said. "Sorry, but I can't handle this one-on-one."

"Go figure."

Time to run.

Rather than fighting here, I was better off running into the woods and then picking off enemies one at a time when I got them alone. I'd never expected him to be so good with a sword, but if I picked off his men and left him until

last, I could deal with him if I caught him sleeping. That was the simplest and easiest approach.

“Pathetic. Call yourself a knight?” I taunted him.

It’s about time to quit this pointless talk.

“You’ve earned my respect, but I’ve still got a job to do,” Canka replied.

Then there was a flash of light from behind Canka, followed by an explosion that sounded like a massive firecracker.

I didn’t feel the blast at all, but I saw debris fly out in all directions when the bright flash appeared. Canka, however, must’ve felt the blast through his armor, because he stumbled toward me for a moment.

Instinct guided my movements as I took a step forward, then another, then leapt toward him. While I was still midair, I aimed a hook at Canka’s face with my right hand. I was holding the dagger with an underhand grip in that same hand. The blade slashed across Canka’s face.

But Canka had reacted too—he puffed out his chest and drew his head back, making his face harder to reach.

Did I get him?

“Ngah!”

As he shrieked, I felt a powerful blow to my gut.

While still holding the sword in both hands, he’d driven both his fists into my stomach. He hadn’t hit me with enough force to send me flying backward, but it had been enough to push me back a little while still in the air.

It meant that, when I landed, I was well within reach of the point of his longsword.



Before I could regain my stance, Canka swung his sword at me, sweeping from left to right.

My body was ill-positioned with my feet side by side on the ground, so I had no way to block it. Since the swing was aimed at my hips, I wouldn't be able to duck under it either.

Back off.

The reflexes instilled in me through training told me exactly what to do.

I hadn't completely lost the momentum from the punch I'd taken to the stomach.

To absorb the impact of my landing, I bent my knees, straightened them forcefully, and launched off the ground. As I completely straightened my legs, I also bent my upper body backward.

As I pushed myself off the ground, the force lifted my lower body higher than my upper torso, causing me to spin through the air. I rotated a full turn about my center of mass. I'd just backflipped.

Luckily, I landed firmly on both feet and could continue using the momentum to jump backward, like I was stumbling away from him.

It surprised me how easily I was able to pull off these movements when the situation called for it.

I lifted my head and looked at Canka, but he wasn't coming after me. He remained rooted to the same spot. His earlier attack must've been an act of desperation.

I realized that my dagger just happened to be lying in front of me, so I snatched it up. I was lucky I hadn't stood on it and broken it.

I looked at Canka again. He took one hand off his sword as he watched me, then he put his hand to his face. I could clearly see the blood gushing from the bridge of his nose.

Carol's dagger hadn't been used once since we'd set out, so the blade was still every bit as sharp as the last time it had been professionally maintained.

Although I hadn't felt anything but air when I'd swept the weapon across his face, it appeared I'd actually cut deep into the bridge of his nose. The blood pouring from the wound dyed the back of his hand a deep red as he put pressure on it.

Then I became aware of a cold feeling at my toes. His sword must've hit the bottom of my shoe as he'd swung it, because my left sole had a chunk missing. My left foot, being my nondominant foot, must've moved just a little slower than the right one when I'd jumped. I broke into a cold sweat. If I'd been just a little slower, he would've severed my foot at the ankle.

I put both daggers back into their sheaths. In their place, I picked up the shortbow I was wearing on my back, then reached for the quiver and took out an arrow.

The shortbow was designed for portability. The intended user was an adult male, so it required a little strength, but the all-important draw length was so short that it made me grit my teeth in frustration. It would be weak compared to a longbow, but it would still have enough power to pierce through crude leather chest plates.

I drew, then shot the arrow, sending it flying straight at Canka's face. Canka deflected it with ease. With a clink, it hit the armored plate on the back of his hand—the one he was using to hold his nose—then fell to the ground.

Yeah, I didn't think that was going to do much.

I notched a second arrow. This time, I aimed at a target behind Canka.

Behind him, his men were in agony. Presumably, the flying debris had torn holes in their bodies. I took aim at the first man I saw, then drew the bow. He had his fingers in his chest, like he was trying to pull a piece of shrapnel out. The arrow *whooshed* toward him, then embedded itself in his neck. With a muffled "Guh," he collapsed.

Canka looked behind him to see what I'd done, then looked back at me, his eyes full of hatred.

I didn't want it to be like this, but you guys won't stop chasing me.

I notched another arrow, then aimed at a man on the opposite side of Canka.

This time, Canka raised the sword he held in one hand to knock the arrow out of the air. But with one hand holding his nose, he couldn't react quickly enough. Indifferent to his efforts, the arrow embedded itself in a man's shoulder.

He'd been too slow this time, but he'd be able to deflect all of my arrows with his armor if he used his whole body. Still, that wouldn't be a problem. Canka's wounds were too serious to simply stop bleeding without treatment. If he refused to rest, then the biggest threat by far—the only enemy with at least as much skill in combat as me—would simply die from blood loss. The nine wounded soldiers that remained could be taken out one at a time later.

I acted like I was about to shoot the third arrow to the left, but then fired at a man on the right. This time it hit my target in the thigh before Canka had time to block it.

If this continued, I was certain of victory. It felt like discovering a path to checkmate in a togi game.

With a piece of my boot missing, I was a quarter of the way to being barefoot, but I could still run through this forest without shoes if I had to. I'd done all the intense fighting I needed to, and I intended to run if anyone came at me now.

After blocking a fourth arrow, Canka looked like he'd had enough. He appeared to be calmly assessing the situation. Then, when a fifth arrow hit one of his men in the stomach, he looked like he'd made up his mind.

"Run!" he cried before turning his back to me. "Run! Run!"

As he yelled at his men, he retreated into the forest.

What? He's running? It actually caught me by surprise. *But I'm alone. I thought I'd be the one chased off.*

Surprising as it was, it was a smart decision. They'd be hopelessly disorganized if they lost Canka. Naturally, turning their backs to me put them at a huge disadvantage, but it was better than remaining in the current situation.

With Canka out of the way, new targets presented themselves to me. I fired an arrow that embedded itself into another soldier's back.

I'd only had eleven arrows originally, and one of those remaining had a

whistle attached to it. That meant I only had five usable arrows left now.

In my hurry, I fired another and missed from close range. The target wasn't even ten meters away. I scored hits with the next four, but all the healthy soldiers had already fled into the forest as fast as they could. I'd have to follow them.

I began the chase, reaching out for the quiver on the back of the man I'd shot in the neck a moment ago and snatching up his arrows as I went.

But I only made it one more step before pain shot through the bottom of my foot. It wasn't the sort of sharp pain I might feel when standing on a sharp rock. It was more like standing on a piece of glass and having it tear through my skin.

I'd forgotten that the shrapnel from the bomb was scattered all over the ground. I tsked at my own mistake.

I notched an arrow where I stood and fired it into someone's back, causing him to collapse.

As those who were injured by my attacks began to disappear into the forest, I continued to fire arrows at them one after another. Most of them had sustained damage from both the bomb and the arrows, but I saw one man disappear into the forest before I could take aim at him. That meant at least two soldiers had escaped without being wounded by an arrow—one of them being Canka.

"Damn."

I checked and saw a three-centimeter-long piece of iron sticking out of the bottom of my foot. It was a fragment of the broken sword I'd placed in the bomb. It was stuck in there deep. I couldn't give chase until I'd tended to the wound.

Damn it. This whole thing backfired.



I hobbled over to a nearby rock while walking on the heel of my left foot and tore up the cloth I'd been wearing on my head.

First, I had to get the piece of shrapnel out. I gripped it with my fingers and

pulled. “Ngh!”

I threw the sharp piece away, then quickly bound my foot tightly near my toes.

I shouldn't stay here.

As I stood up, I felt my foot tingle as blood flowed from the wound. Binding it clearly wasn't enough to stop it from bleeding.

At least now I had lots of arrows. There were also two guns.

I shot some of my remaining arrows into enemies who were groaning nearby. One still had healthy legs, and one tried to lunge at me, but I simply took him down with an arrow that he failed to dodge. After firing an arrow into each man's torso, I decided to pursue the others.

I walked about one hundred meters before finding the body of a man who'd died with horrible wounds to his torso.

I'd killed five men just now, so in total I'd now killed seven out of the twelve. Five more to go.

After I'd traveled another four hundred meters, I found two more men and heavily wounded them as well. I didn't check that they were dead. There'd be no one to give them treatment, so I just had to leave them in critical condition. That way, they didn't have any chance of making it out of the forest.

After going a little farther, I found some discarded armor—Canka must've taken it off.

There weren't any leg parts—those must've been too time-consuming to remove—but I saw the torso armor, helmet, and arm pieces. He must've thought I'd catch up if he was armored. He didn't know that my foot was wounded.

My foot stung, and I could feel the blood continuously flowing out, giving the area where the makeshift bandage touched my skin the strange sensation of wearing a water-filled boot. I couldn't catch Canka in this state.

I'll have to let him go. There goes my chance.

Three of the enemy soldiers had gotten away from me.

I tried stomping on the torso piece in an attempt to destroy it, but my injury prevented me from using enough force to even warp the shape. In an attempt to cause as much damage as I could do, I removed the face protector and crushed it under my feet. Then I swung the arm parts into a tree while holding on to the fingers. Five or six whacks was enough to distort them, but not enough to completely destroy them. Fatigue made me give up quickly. I decided to head back.

I returned to the place where they'd put down their belongings and went through the packs they'd abandoned beside the five bodies. The enemy had fled before they could gather their supplies, so everything was still here. It was likely at least one of them had carried a needle and thread for sewing up wounds, even though those weren't essential items. They took up so little space that I'd originally packed some myself.

I couldn't find any.

I *did* find a straight needle for sewing, but it wasn't suitable for sewing up wounds that were more than skin deep. I needed one that was sickle-shaped, or else I'd struggle. I'd hoped to sew myself up there and then, but that wasn't going to be possible. I'd left my own needle with Carol, so I'd just have to cope until I returned to her.

However, I did find a useful item—some liquor. I was grateful for that, since I could use it to disinfect the wound.

Next were the guns. I picked them up and found they were a lot heavier than the one I'd bought myself. The weight of them made me give up on the idea of taking them with me—they'd be too much of a burden. I decided it was better to dispose of them.

I collected as many new arrows as I could for my quiver, then I searched around for food. While I was at it, I collected all the leftover arrows, swords, and anything gun-related.

Once I'd gathered all the items I didn't want into a pile with some branches, I set fire to the whole thing with my lighter. To the enemy, these were precious resources that I was burning up.

Now the remaining men would find it hard to escape the forest...if they even

survived. Their best hope would be to happen across a road and find some friendly soldiers, but their chances were slim.

After waiting to check that the pile of supplies had turned into a healthy blaze, I headed back toward Carol.



While favoring my right leg, I somehow managed to make it back without getting lost. Carol was still safe, right where I'd left her.

A could see a bump under the brown oil paper between the trees. When I appeared from the trees, a pair of eyes glared out at me from under the hood. Once she knew it was me, she relaxed.

"Yuri...!" Carol seemed thoroughly relieved at my return.

"Yeah, I'm back."

"What happened to your leg? Are you injured?" She'd quickly realized that something was up with my leg.

"Yeah. I'm a mess."

The whole situation really *was* a mess. Three or four times while I'd been heading back, I'd found myself thinking that if I'd just taken some care and walked around the shrapnel, I could've put an end to everything. All of our problems could've been solved already. But no amount of regret would let me turn back the clock.

"Let me see," Carol said.

I sat down and held out my left foot to her.

Carol removed her raincoat, then shifted her position a little so she could put my foot on her thigh. I'd planned to tend to the wound myself, but Carol would probably do a better job of sewing it up given how tired I was.

"Can I take off the bandage?" she asked.

"It'll bleed, so you'd better get the needle ready first. I've got some alcohol too." I passed her the bottle. "Would you disinfect it for me?"

"All right."

I lay on the bare earth so that my foot would be above my heart as it rested on Carol's thigh.

Once Carol had everything ready, she untied the tight bandage. "This is deep. You kept going with this injury...?"

"Please wash it out quickly."

Carol poured some alcohol over the wound.

"Guh..." It stung.

"Are you all right...?"

"I'm fine. Clean the inside of it too."

Carol rinsed her own fingers, then gently spread the wound open so she could pour alcohol inside.

"Nngh..." It felt like I was being stabbed in the foot.

"Yuri..."

"Don't tell me to suffer in silence."

"It's not that."

Then what?

"It looks like there's...iron or something stuck inside."

Ah...

I could guess how that happened. The shrapnel must've broken under the skin. That was why it felt like my foot was being stabbed with each step—something really *was* stabbing it.

"Take it out," I said.

"But...I'm not sure how."

Tweezers would've been useful, both to extract the debris and to stitch up the wound. Unfortunately, we didn't have any.

"Can't you get it with your fingers?" I asked.

"Maybe... I won't know until I try it."

“Then try it. You can’t sew it up while there’s still a piece of iron inside.”

“All right.”

Carol carefully disinfected her fingers once more, then stuck them deep into the wound.

“Ngh...! Gah...!” I gritted my teeth as I endured the pain.

When Carol pulled her fingers away, it felt like the source of the pain itself was being extracted.

“You...You got it?” It had hurt so much that I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Yes. It’s all out.”

“Okay. That’s great. Now disinfect it again, then quickly sew it up.”

I’d lost a lot of blood, but it couldn’t have been a full liter. I wanted to close the wound while the bleeding was still at a level that wasn’t life-threatening.

“All we’ve got is this really thick thread,” Carol said.

“Ah... That’s right.” I’d brought it thinking that any wounds we sewed up were likely to be large, deep cuts, so I hadn’t packed anything finer. “It’ll have to do.”

“I could use my hair, if that’s better.”

“That’ll do... I mean, yes, please use your hair.”

It was fairly common for human hair to be used in sewing. Unlike mine, Carol’s was long enough for the purpose. It wasn’t frizzy either.

“If you’re using hair, twist two strands together—I don’t want it to break. And make sure to wash the hair with alcohol too.”

“I know.”

A moment later, she’d threaded the needle. “Here goes,” she said.

“Go ahead.”

The needle punctured my skin, but the pain was nothing compared to what I’d just felt a moment ago.

“Ngh...”

Despite the pain, it wasn't hard to keep my foot still. Carol stitched up the wound rapidly and soon had it closed up.

"All right. I'm done."

"Okay."

I sat up and looked at the injury. Carol had sewn up beautifully. The needle had passed through a broad, deep region in the center of the wound, so I knew she'd been thorough. It didn't look like blood was going to pool under the skin either. It was possible she'd practiced this in private after she'd learned it at the Knight Academy. If that were the case, then her constant efforts had proved fruitful.

"Thanks," I said. "I owe you."

"No...it's me who should be thanking you."

"Let's just call it even."

I wanted a clean cloth to put over it, but we didn't have any. It was probably going to get infected to some degree.

"With my foot in this state, it'll be tough to keep going the way we were."

"Okay..." Carol muttered softly.

I could still carry Carol, but I wouldn't be able to travel as fast as I'd done up to now.

"But we're almost at the village," I added. "We can rest up a little when we get there."

It'd be risky, but we had no choice. If we wanted to be in good shape for the walk to Reforme, I'd need more than a day of rest.

"Shouldn't we rest here for a while?" Carol asked.

"If the village is safe, we can find some clean cloth in a home there. Forcing myself to keep going is the route to recovery."

"All right. Then I'll walk too."

Huh?

“I think I’m almost healed. I can walk if I use the staff,” she added.

“No, it’s too soon. If you make your injury worse, we’ll be in bigger trouble.”

“I’ll go slow, using the staff. It’ll be faster than letting you carry me with that injured foot.”

She could be right...

I knew it would be tough to walk while carrying Carol and all our belongings. If I was trying to keep weight off my left foot at the same time, I wouldn’t be much faster than Carol walking with a staff.

“Let’s leave behind anything we can get hold of again when we’re in the village later,” Carol suggested.

“Ah... Good idea,” I said as despair filled me.

If we’d almost made it to the village, then enemies riding along the roads on horseback had probably gotten to it already. It was hard to imagine our unit would still be there waiting for us.

If the unit *had* remained in the village, it would be isolated in an area controlled by the enemy. I knew Liao wouldn’t stick around until the situation had gotten that bad. If we didn’t find any allies there, we’d have to try heading for Reforme, but the journey would be just as long as the one we’d just made.

It’d been eleven days since our crash. Accounting for some time spent resting up in the village, we might arrive in the city after a total of thirty days.

The question was whether Verdun Fortress could keep the Kulati busy for an entire month. It was possible. The fortress was so well-defended that it might take years to breach. But if the enemy toppled it quickly, their main force would charge right over to Reforme and encircle the city. After betting everything on our efforts to walk to Reforme, we might find ourselves greeted by an enemy army instead of warm beds.

The squad led by Canka hadn’t been completely wiped out either. And the most dangerous member of that group—Canka himself—was still out there somewhere.

It’s just problem after problem. If only I hadn’t gotten injured.

I opened my watch and checked the time. After all that had happened, it was still only 2 p.m.

“All right. Let’s eat, get our things together, and then cover what distance we can before sunset.”

“Okay.” Carol nodded.

We must’ve walked three kilometers. As the sun was beginning to set, I sat down, exhausted.

“Let’s rest here for today.”

I was feeling light-headed, and there was a throbbing ache in my neck that might’ve been from the blood loss. I threw together a few branches that I found on the ground, then set them on fire with the lighter.

The lighter must be low on fuel by now.

“Phew...” Carol supported her weight with the staff as she took a seat beside me.

As we waited for the bonfire to get going, I took out a map from my belongings. I estimated that we’d traveled the width of two fingers and marked the map with a pencil to indicate our current position.

I felt my estimate was about right, but rough markings like this could easily be way off. At the very least, I hoped it was accurate enough for us to emerge on the road a little north of Nikka Village, then follow it the rest of the way. That would be smarter than heading directly to the village.

I put the map away.

“We’ve got it good tonight. There’s actually meat.”

“I think it’s been a whole week since we last had any.”

Somewhere before we’d reached the road where the round boulder had been dropped, we’d managed to catch a single rabbit and eat it. We hadn’t had any meat since.

“Yeah, and we couldn’t even drain all the blood out of it last time.”

I'd once encountered Gino Toga living on half-rotten meat in the forest. Now we were the ones living that way because we were so rushed. We couldn't stop to prepare our meat properly; we were just glad to have anything that'd fill our stomachs.

"This time it's good ham," I said. "There's salt too."

Their leader, Canka, had probably held on to this to give to his men as a treat at some point. It was pork—or some sort of similar meat—that had been smoked, then baked. Half of it had been eaten already, but the remainder was still a good amount.

"Looks like a treat," Carol said.

"Yeah. Let's roast it."

I unwrapped the cloth covering the ham and cut it into two with my knife. I put a skewer through a piece, then passed it to Carol.

"We can have bread with it too," I said.

"Okay."

Ironically, we had our pursuers to thank for the improvement in our food situation.

As we held the thick slices of smoked ham to the fire, the fat inside them began to sizzle as the meat roasted. We continued to turn our pieces until they were close to turning black. The smell was so good I felt like I'd start drooling.

"Will these even fit inside the bread?" Carol asked.

"Grab this skewer for a minute." I said, passing it to Carol.

I rummaged through the bag, which contained several pieces of hard-baked bread—like small french baguettes. They'd been prepared so that they'd have a good shelf life. There was white coating of wheat flour on the surface of each piece. That was a smart idea—even if the bread got dirty, the flour could be brushed off to make it clean again.

The meat obviously wasn't going to fit inside these, but we could eat the parts sticking out from the bread first.

I used my knife to cut through eight-tenths of a piece of bread to cut it open, then did the same for a second piece.

“It’s done.”

“Okay.”

I traded her a loaf for my piece of meat, then removed the skewer while holding the meat in the bread.

I bit off some of the ham that hung out of the sandwich. My body must’ve been crying out for meat, because it tasted incredible. The charred taste of the meat, along with its oils and juices, filled my mouth. They carried the smoked aroma, making it sweet like nectar.

I took a pinch of our salt, which looked like large pieces of coarse rock salt, and sprinkled it on the meat before taking another bite. It couldn’t have been more satisfying. It was as if this was exactly the nutrition that my body had been lacking.

What does Carol think of it?

I looked over and saw her open her mouth wide to take a big bite. She was happily enjoying it too, though it looked like she was having trouble sinking her teeth through the bread because it was so tough. Once she’d bitten a piece off, she chewed it quickly before gulping it down.

Then she realized I was watching her.

“Hey,” she said, sounding just a little aggressive.

“Hm?”

“It’s embarrassing when you’re staring at me like that.”

“What is?”

“It wouldn’t be so bad if I had a knife and fork, but I don’t want you to see me ripping off chunks with my mouth open wide.”

She’s still worrying about stuff like that?

“All right, I’ll stop then.” Being stared at would put me in a bad mood too. Or maybe not, but it would make me self-conscious at least.

“G-Good,” Carol replied.

Instead, I gazed at the bonfire as I finished what was left of my sandwich.

“That was good,” Carol said contentedly.

“Full?”

“Yep.”

We still had a lot of bread left. My stomach must’ve shrunk, because I was too full to finish the rest.

“Then let’s get some sleep,” I said.

“Okay. But first...”

“Hm?”

What now?

“Thank you, Yuri,” she said.

“What? Why?”

“Well, we’ll reach Nikka tomorrow, right?”

“We should.”

By my reckoning, we’d walked about two hundred kilometers, but it was possible my estimate was off. That was the distance I’d worked out using my map, but I couldn’t be confident.

“We might find our unit or someone else waiting to rescue us at the village, right?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t think it was likely, but there was no reason to snuff out Carol’s hope. Besides, it wasn’t impossible that a special extraction force had been assembled for us.

“If that’s the case, they might carry us out of here quickly. I wouldn’t ever get the chance to say thanks.”

“You’ll get chances, and you know it.”

They're not going to keep us apart for the rest of our lives.

"Yeah, but...saying it later would feel kinda...empty. I wanted to say it here."

"Okay." She had nothing to thank me for, but rejecting her gratitude right now would just be rude. I decided I'd better just accept her thanks. "You're right. But I should say thanks to you too."

"For what?"

"For being here, alive. I said it before, but if you'd died, I would've been too depressed to do anything."

"Maybe I shouldn't even ask, but...you never thought that maybe...it'd be better if I died?"

What kind of question is that? It was so weird I couldn't help but grin. "You know, posing a question that way means you can never be sure of an honest answer," I replied.

"I know, but...it just feels like you'd think that."

She's awfully open with her feelings today. Assuming that we were approaching the village where friends were waiting must've made her lower her guard. Not that we were likely to find friends there.

"No, I never thought that."

"Okay... Then can I ask why not?"

"Because I didn't. I don't know what else to say."

"But most people would've felt that way."

"Okay, what's more precious to you than anything else?" I asked.

"That's a sudden change of subject."

"Just answer. I'm going somewhere with this."

"Hmm... The Shiyalta Kingdom, I guess."

Her country? I expected something smaller in scale, but I suppose it's not unusual—especially when you consider the family she was born into.

"The most precious thing to me used to be myself," I told her.

“That’s probably normal.”

“Yeah. Everyone considers themselves important. More to the point, they value their lives.”

“Yep, I understand that. I didn’t want to die either.”

“But a life of valuing yourself above all else feels meaningless.” Having lived my past life the same way, I had all the more reason to think so.

“Is it...?”

“If I’m what’s most important, then I’ll spend my whole life thinking about myself. But now that I have something more precious than myself...that gives a little value to something that’s otherwise worthless.”

“Uh... And that’s why you saved me?”

“Basically, yeah.”

“Sounds complicated...”

“You don’t have to understand it. There’s no need to put effort into figuring out someone else’s philosophy.”

“But...wouldn’t that mean that you think I’m more important than your own life?”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have almost worked myself to death trying to save you.”

If I’d been with someone less important...well, I wouldn’t have simply abandoned them, but I wouldn’t have done much. Maybe I’d have dug them a hole, camouflaged it, and said, “Here’s some food. Now wait here until help comes.”

“It’s not just because I’m a princess, is it?”

“Huh?” I couldn’t help but cry out in surprise at that unexpected question.

What kind of ideas is she getting into her head?

“Um... Do you really think I’m the type of person who’d risk my life for the sake of gratitude from the royal family?”

“Not at all.”

If you're so sure, then don't ask. You're going to ruin a nice moment.

“All right. I get it.” Carol spoke softly, though I wasn't sure if she'd understood at all.

“Let's just get some sleep. We're done eating already.”

“Should we put the fire out?” she asked.

“We should. I don't think they'll come for us now I've driven them off, but there's still a chance they'll attack us while we're sleeping.”

“Yeah, okay. Let's put it out.”

Carol hit the bonfire with the tip of her staff, causing the pile of burning branches to fall apart. Though flames remained, they'd soon fade to embers and die.

I stood up and leaned my back against a tree. In this position, I couldn't be attacked from behind. As I took out the oilpaper poncho as always, Carol moved closer.

Once we were both inside the same poncho, Carol muttered, “Hey...”

I could feel her body warmth through my clothes, her face was so close to mine that our cheeks almost touched, and I could almost hear every breath she took. Though she spoke in little more than a whisper, I could hear her clearly at this distance.

“What is it?”

“Can I ask something?”

“What?”

Didn't we talk plenty already? I guess it's fine since I'm not sleepy.

“Um... Do you have a fiancée?”

“Huh?”

She's full of unexpected questions today. She keeps catching me off guard.

“No, but...why'd you ask?”

“Are you dating anyone?”

“No.”

Of course I'm not.

“Then...I can tell you how I feel,” Carol said nervously.

She moved her face, and I felt something warm against my lips.

After kissing me, she said it clearly. “I love you.”



Epilogue — Myalo's Struggle

It was the night after the observation unit's return to Nikka Village.

Myalo Gudinveil had gathered everyone from the unit's Ho faction in the mayor's house, where she did her best to address them calmly.

"In any case, I'd like you to obey my instructions rather than acting rashly."

"You can't just let Liao Rube do whatever he likes!" A member two years older than Myalo spoke frankly and passionately. He was the eldest son of a fairly influential family that served the Hos.

"I think I understand your misgivings. I realize that Liao Rube doesn't consider Yuri a high priority. He's more concerned about his own safety and what the Rube family stands to gain."

"If you've figured that out, then how can you disagree with the idea of us breaking away from the unit and acting independently?!"

The observation unit was close to falling apart. Yuri Ho and Carol Flue Shaltl were gone, leaving Liao Rube as their commanding officer.

Although the Ho family's followers held the most sway within the unit, they were essentially under the Rube faction's control at this point. The Knight Academy students loyal to the Ho family were finding the situation difficult to accept. In their minds, the idea of returning to the Shiyalta Kingdom while abandoning their future master, Yuri Ho, was unthinkable. It would result in the Ho family's downfall, and—though these students hadn't yet made vows of allegiance—they felt a strong connection to the family. They couldn't help but fear what might happen if they continued to obey Liao Rube's orders.

"I *do* agree with you," Myalo lied in order to quell their emotions. "But we can't break away too soon. If Liao Rube uses his authority to force us into turning our backs on Yuri, then we'll do so."

"But how are we going to decide when it's the right moment?"

“When I decide we need to break away, I’ll inform you all.”

The son from an influential house serving as the representative of the Ho faction fell silent, but he looked ready to argue. Likely, he wanted to ask why he should believe the promises of a witch.

This whole dispute was happening because Yuri’s instructions had been clear —“If anything ever happens to me, trust Myalo’s judgment.” It had been more of a verbal agreement than an official order, but now it was the main thing that gave Myalo her authority.

“You might not trust me, but please trust in Yuri’s decision to bring me here. He wouldn’t bring someone from a witch family with us for no reason. He brought me because he knows I’ll never betray him, and because he believes my decisions are generally for the best.”

“I’ll accept that, but it doesn’t mean we’re going to take orders from you.”

“Of course. If you insist on breaking away, I’m powerless to stop you, but please discuss it with me first. That’s why I’m here, and you have an obligation to hear me out. Yuri doesn’t favor those who forget their obligations on the battlefield.”

“I know that!” He was only listening begrudgingly, but that didn’t matter.

Myalo was confident she could control their actions as long as they continued to listen to her. A group like his wouldn’t put a plan into action once they’d been given a thorough explanation as to why it was a mistake. Hearing her out would also relieve them of some of the pressure. If they acted alone, it was a given that they’d take responsibility for their own actions. Since they’d be acting against Yuri’s wishes, failure was certain to make him angry. But if they were following Myalo’s instructions, then they could escape the blame even if they failed.

The role Yuri had given Myalo as chief of staff came with no authority to issue orders, but it did give her indirect power over others. To Myalo, that was a familiar arrangement—it felt like a weapon designed especially for her to wield.

“Now please return to your posts. Allow me to keep an eye on Liao Rube.”

“That you should. Come on, let’s go.”

The difficult Ho faction left Myalo's presence.



"Phew..." As night fell, Myalo returned to the room she called her own to get some rest. She used the flame from the portable lamp she'd been carrying to light the thick beeswax candle that served as her nightlight. Then she blew out the lamp and got into bed.

She remembered how Yuri had told her that they were about to get very busy, so she should get all the rest she could. He'd been entirely correct, though it was hard to imagine that Yuri had foreseen any of this.

Myalo lay down, closed her eyes, and tried not to think. Feelings of anxiety and restlessness kept coming back, making it hard to sleep, but just lying there with her eyes closed would bring some of sleep's benefits. Even now, she had to stay well rested. Things weren't about to improve anytime soon, and several days of sleeplessness would leave her mind dulled and cloud her decision-making. It was crucial to rest when she could.

Tap. Tap.

She heard a knocking sound, but it wasn't coming from the door—it was something hitting the window's wooden frame.

Myalo picked up the dagger concealed under her pillow and unsheathed it. She wasn't a confident fighter, but other members of her unit would come to her aid if she yelled while defending herself.

She heard a woman's voice outside the window. "Open up."

"Who is it?"

"A royal sword." The response explained everything.

"Please give me a moment."

Myalo returned her dagger to its sheath and got out of bed. She undid the latch and opened the window. Her room was on the first floor, so the woman was standing on the ground outside.

Myalo began by respectfully lowering her head. "I heard about you from Yuri. I'm sorry that we've allowed it to come to this." It was her first time talking to a

royal sword, but based on what she knew about them, she expected this one would be furious.

“Forget it. Her Majesty was aware that something like this could happen. That’s why I was dispatched.”

“I see.”

It was true. Myalo knew that Yuri would have warned Her Majesty about the danger when she’d summoned him; he’d probably expressed the same concerns to the royal sword.

“I’m going to head to the crash site,” the royal sword said. “I intend to track her down.”

“Ah, I see.”

Yuri and Carol had crashed the previous day. This royal sword would’ve learned about the incident soon after the unit had returned that afternoon. It seemed strange that she was still here in the village. Perhaps she’d had to dispatch a messenger to the royal castle in Sibiak to notify them of the situation. Still, that wouldn’t have taken a whole day. She’d been too slow to act, but the part about her heading to the crash site made sense.

The royal sword was holding a horse’s reins. It wasn’t one of the draft horses used by the unit to pull carts; it was one bred for riding. Finding that might’ve been what had delayed her. Even if the royal sword changed her clothes and hid her ears, she’d immediately be recognized as a Shanti if she rode through enemy territory on a plainrunner. That would make every action more difficult.

“Before I set out, I’d like you to tell me what road that man is likely to use. You understand his thinking better than anyone.”

I see. That’s the type of rational approach I’d expect from a royal sword.

“Ordinarily, I’d expect him to follow the coast. It avoids the route friendly forces are using to retreat, so there’ll be less chance of being caught in the advancing enemy.”

“All right. Yes, that makes sense.”

“But it’s hard to say without knowing their situation. Liao Rube confirmed

that Yuri was safe, but...”

Back then, Myalo had been with the group searching the spot where Carol and the dragon had crashed, so she hadn’t seen Yuri climb the tree with her own eyes.

“Can I trust that information?” the royal sword asked. “Is it possible that the Rube family’s heir would make false reports?”

“Impossible. The kingeagle companies weren’t based on family allegiance, so some of Yuri’s own saw him.”

“I see...” Her line of work must have made her naturally distrustful toward chieftain families. “Suppose Her Highness didn’t survive. What would that man do?”

“I wonder...”

Although Yuri had survived, a crash into a forest from such high altitude would normally prove fatal. Myalo had already considered that possibility herself, but didn’t expect the royal sword to operate based on that assumption.

“I believe he’d be distraught for some time, but he’d most likely bury her, then try to bring back some sort of keepsake.”

“Is he capable of making it back?”

“Yuri speaks Kulatish with skill comparable to a native speaker. I believe he’ll figure something out.”

Myalo wasn’t worried about Yuri. She might’ve been if he’d been badly injured, but she knew he was fit enough to climb a tree. Getting back from the crash site would be easy for someone with his level of ability.

The problem was Carol. If Carol was injured, or if she’d been captured before Yuri could descend from the tree and get to her, Yuri would try to find a way to bring her back. That might prevent him from returning.

“All right... I see.”

“Can you speak Kulatish?” Myalo asked.

“No, I can’t. I’m learning it, but I’m not good enough to hold a conversation.”

“Okay...”

During their conversation, Myalo had been thinking over an idea that had come to mind. She was considering abandoning the unit right then and there and acting together with the royal sword. She considered it a good idea with many merits.

First, despite having plainrunners, the observation unit lacked the armor and spears needed for an attack, because fighting had never been part of the plan. That left them ill-equipped to fight their way through enemy territory while looking for Carol and Yuri. It wasn't impossible, but they'd suffer huge losses if they tried it.

In a situation like this, working together with the royal sword was likely to produce better outcomes than working with the larger unit. The two of them could infiltrate deep beyond enemy lines and then extract information from enemy soldiers that they quietly captured.

The royal sword looked at Myalo curiously. She was an expert in espionage and infiltration. Having a somewhat competent Kulatish speaker with her would surely prove useful. “What?”

“No...it's nothing,” Myalo said after some thought.

“Okay, I'm going.” The royal sword asked no further questions. She pulled on the reins to draw the horse closer.

“I'll be praying for your success. I mean it.”

“I'm sure,” the royal sword said before mounting the horse and leaving Myalo behind.

Myalo hadn't suggested going with her because it had only been a day since the crash. It was still highly likely that Yuri would come galloping back on a stolen horse, bringing Carol with him. Given the location of the crash site, it would take him at least three days to get back, even if everything went perfectly. If Yuri made it back unharmed only to find Myalo missing, it would create a new problem for him to deal with. Since Yuri wouldn't readily abandon Myalo to return to Shiyalta, her absence would create a serious dilemma.

On top of that, there was no way for Myalo to hold back the unit's Ho faction

if she wasn't there. Some of them had already been talking of splitting up after a single day. If they were left alone for three days, there was a high chance that they'd embark on some rash rescue mission that caused even more problems.

It was Yuri himself who mattered to Myalo. The lives of the Ho faction members were a low priority, but keeping the unit functioning in times of emergency was an important role she'd been given. She was willing to disregard their lives, but she couldn't easily disregard a task given to her by Yuri.

Yuri wasn't counting on Myalo to come look for him—he was counting on her to manage things here.

"Haah... I'm tired." The anxieties that weighed heavily on Myalo made her sigh as she got back into bed.



Bam, bam, bam!

Myalo was awoken by someone rapping at the door. She'd been lying in bed until dawn, and at some point, she must've drifted to sleep.

"Myalo! Get up!" The voice from outside the room belonged to Liao Rube.

Myalo's mind still felt hazy from sleep deprivation as she unlocked the door. "What is it?" she asked.

"Dolla Godwin's gone crazy. Talk to him."

"Dolla?"

She was fully awake now.

Myalo dressed in a hurry and headed out to the plainrunner shed where she was told she'd find Dolla Godwin.

A crowd surrounded the building, and Myalo had to push her way through to get near. There she found Dolla about to mount a fully equipped plainrunner. The atmosphere was tense as the other unit members were trying to talk him out of it.

"Dolla, what's gotten into you?" Myalo asked.

The other students, recognizing that Myalo lived in the same dorm as Dolla and knew him well, relaxed a little and gave the two some space.

“Obviously, I’m gonna go save Princess Carol.”

I could’ve guessed that much, Myalo thought.

Dolla was fully equipped and ready to head out, and there was only one place he’d go.

“Please get that idea out of your head,” she told him. *You’re making my life difficult.*

“Well, what’re *you* doing about it? Sitting around here and talking won’t save Her Highness.”

“You’re right. I haven’t done anything.”

Myalo really *hadn’t* done anything, so it was an honest response. She’d spent time in so-called strategy meetings debating this and that, but nothing had come of any of it.

The unit had kingeagles that they were using to fly over the roads Yuri and Carol were likely to take, and to watch the forest from above while blowing their whistles. But the best they could hope for was a signal in response from Yuri and Carol below.

Unsatisfied with this ineffective plan, Dolla seemed determined to go look for them himself.

“Then I’m going,” he said. “I’ve got to save Princess Carol myself.”

“What can you do to save her?”

“I’ll do whatever I have to.”

“You haven’t thought this through. If you follow the roads back to the battlefield, you’ll just die fighting the Kulati. Suppose you manage to kill ten or twenty of them before you inevitably get overwhelmed; is that what you want?”

Dolla scowled and rejected everything Myalo had just said. “You don’t know if that’ll happen.”

“It *will* happen,” Myalo insisted. She was certain. Dolla might’ve been wise enough to hide if a large number of enemies came after him, but even then, his luck would run out eventually.

“I won’t know until I try it.”

“The outcome’s obvious. First, what do you think you’ll achieve inside the enemy-controlled region when you can’t even speak Kulatish? Do you think that if you charge along the roads mowing down enemies, or if you wander aimlessly through the forests, that you’ll just happen to bump into Yuri and Carol?”

“I won’t know. Until I try it.”

“If Yuri was here, he’d tell you that expecting such a miracle in battle is the height of folly.”

“Shut up about him!” Dolla suddenly yelled. His rage was so intense that Myalo felt he would’ve punched her if she hadn’t been female. “He didn’t protect Princess Carol!”

Ah, that’s why he’s so mad.

“Please don’t speak of Her Highness as if we’ve already lost her. There’s a high chance that the two of them are headed here right now.”

“He failed the minute she crashed. He wasn’t protecting her.”

“You say that because you didn’t see the dragon up close. None of us could do anything to help her, but Yuri did. He took on the dragon by himself.”

When it had happened, every member of the unit had been left astonished and speechless. Yuri wasn’t the only one who’d tried attacking the dragon with a spear, but the others had failed to do anything other than getting close and swinging their spear around. They hadn’t been able to so much as put a scratch on the beast. Then, when Yuri had appeared, he’d dived at the dragon from high above to thrust his spear into it. It wasn’t just the courage it took to charge in like that; the technique behind his attack had been masterful. It wouldn’t have been possible without the full trust of his eagle.

Dolla was growing more irritated. “Shut it. His job was to find a way no matter what happened.”

“Do you think Yuri is some kind of god? This is war. Yuri, Carol—all of us for that matter—we came here knowing the risks.”

“Oh, I know he isn’t a god. But I’ve got to do whatever I can. We done here?” As Dolla put one foot into the plainrunner’s stirrups, it was clear that he couldn’t be talked into staying.

Myalo felt the blood rush to her head, and her body moved before she could think. When she came to her senses, she realized she’d kicked Dolla’s thigh with all her weight put into it just as he’d lifted his body off the ground with one foot in the stirrup. She felt her foot collide with something heavy.

“Oof!” Dolla couldn’t stop himself from crying out as he tumbled off the plainrunner. After landing on the ground, he jumped to his feet, glared at Myalo, and yelled, “The hell are you doing?!”

“Do you think you’re the only one who’s worried about those two?” Myalo demanded, full of anger.

“No...” Dolla replied, sounding guilty.

“We’re all sick with worry and desperate to do something. All you’re doing is giving in to your impatience and running away.”

“Running...? No! I’m—”

“That’s enough. Just stop and think about it. In an hour from now, if you still want to go, I won’t stop you. I can’t stop you.”

When Dolla didn’t respond, Myalo stopped trying to convince him. She simply turned away and walked off, as if he was no longer her problem.



Myalo realized it was the first time she’d been violent toward anyone outside of combat training.

Though she could remember one other time, back when she was five and a servant had broken one of her favorite toys, she’d reacted by swinging her little fists at her. She hadn’t been violent toward anyone since.

Only after it was over had she begun to tremble. She’d shut herself away in her room to wait for the sensation to pass before stepping out again. As soon as

she did, however, she immediately encountered Dolla leaning against the wall opposite her door.

“Whoa!” She couldn’t help but cry out in surprise.

“Myalo, I wanna talk.”

“D-Don’t scare me like that. What is it?”

“Can I come in?”

“Huh? W-Well, okay...”

Myalo returned to the room. Dolla entered after her and shut the door behind him.

“Well? Have you calmed down?” she asked.

“Yeah. But I’ll never go back to Shiyalta without knowing where Princess Carol is. I can’t leave without her, so I might as well search for her—no matter how reckless it is.”

“Very well.”

Now I see... So he really is head over heels for her. But it’s only going to end in heartbreak for him.

Dolla himself had to have realized the same thing, yet he was still willing to die for her. There couldn’t be many men who’d throw their life away for the sake of a woman who was in love with someone else.

Actually...he’s just like me, Myalo realized.

“Figured that if I’m going, the sooner the better,” Dolla explained. “I can’t stand thinking that I might get there too late because I’ve been standing around here taking too long to decide. Even now, I still feel like that.”

“You may be right, but it’s a little too soon.” Myalo didn’t understand male friendship well enough to know how Yuri might react if Dolla died, but she knew that Carol would be devastated if Dolla threw away his life in an attempt to rescue her.

“What about you?” Dolla asked. “If they don’t come back, you know Liao Rube’s going to take the unit back to Shiyalta, right?”

“Carol’s important to Liao too. He’s searching frantically because he’ll lose all credibility as a knight if he abandons her here. But yes, he ultimately will lead us home if nothing comes of his efforts.”

She knew Liao Rube would spare no effort to find Carol, and that he’d be willing to make sacrifices. Still, his feelings weren’t anything like Dolla’s. Although he’d continue in his efforts to rescue Carol even when it meant putting his life in danger, he’d likely give up once he’d decided that there was only a slim chance of rescuing her. In other words, he was doing all he could to save her, but only up until the situation started to look hopeless.

“Right. And you’ll go back with him?” Dolla asked.

“No, I won’t.”

Myalo couldn’t return without them. She’d have nothing to return to and no life worth living. She couldn’t see any value in the future that awaited her if she graduated the Knight Academy after she’d left them both behind.

“So you won’t leave, but you won’t search? That makes no sense.”

“Yes it does. If several days pass, and I lose all hope that Yuri can make it back without help, then I intend to infiltrate the enemy forces myself after the unit is gone. I speak Kulatish, so I’ll find him. If he’s captured, I’ll find some way to free him.”

It would be the last thing Yuri would want her to do, but Myalo wouldn’t change her mind about this. If Yuri wasn’t coming back, then she had no reason to look after the unit. They could die for all she cared.

“But you don’t know they’ll take him alive.”

“If he doesn’t die in combat, he knows a way to prevent them from executing him. There’s a high chance he’ll be kept alive.”

Yuri had told her in absolute confidence that mentioning Ether Wichita’s name would ensure he was subjected to a long trial. Yuri was unlikely to offer up Ms. Ether’s life because she’d earned his admiration and respect as his teacher, but he still might mention the name for the sake of delaying his execution. That wouldn’t be a betrayal.

“And needless to say, Carol’s such a valuable hostage that they’ll want to take her prisoner,” Myalo added.

“Sounds like a lot of guesswork to me.”

“Yes, it is. We know so little about their situation that it’s hard to be certain of anything.”

This was the problem. They couldn’t take action blindfolded.

“I know you want me to consider the worst case, Dolla, but if we assume the worst and act rashly, we might overreach ourselves and lose most of the unit. Then what would Yuri and Carol think when they got back here? If you were in my shoes, could you order unit members to head for their deaths?”

“I’m not an officer. It’s got nothing to do with me. I’m asking what *you’re* going to do if the unit can’t do anything.”

He’s right. I thought I could talk him down, but he’s not buying it. I’m not sure how to describe it... It’s not wisdom, it’s his will. It’s too strong to be bent by the words of others.

“I can’t act freely until the unit heads back home,” Myalo said. “Though if the unit grows too unruly for me to control, then I might give up on it.”

The chances of that were looking surprisingly high. They had, after all, picked out students driven by ambition and patriotism, making the unit as a whole liable to grow emotional and act recklessly. It was Myalo’s job to make sure that didn’t happen, but it was Liao Rube, not Myalo, who influenced the members most. He had to remain cool while also carefully controlling the feelings of the other members. It would take more than a good-looking man with a silver tongue to handle the situation—it was turning into a true test of Liao’s ability.

“So if Liao leads the unit home before they get back, you’re going to search for them out there?” Dolla asked.

“Yes, that’s my intention.”

“Then I’m going too.”

“Oh?”

He’s going too? Does he mean he’ll come with me?

“You’re right,” Dolla said. “I know I can’t find them searching through the forest by myself, but it’s the best idea someone like me can come up with. If I had you with me, I’d be more useful to Princess Carol.”

“Haaah... Well, that may be true.”

To her surprise, she realized that his reasoning was similar to hers when she’d been talking to the royal sword the previous evening.

“You’re useful because you’re smart, and I’m useful because I’m strong. Good combination, right?”

“Okay, let’s do it,” Myalo agreed. “But don’t forget that there’s a chance they’ll make it back without our help.”

Though he was calm now, Dolla would get worked up again as time passed. For now, their attempts to search were mostly limited to scouting using kingeagles. Since Dolla couldn’t ride an eagle, he couldn’t do anything for Carol yet. It was obvious he was itching to do something, though. He might as well have been resting on a bed of nails.

“I know... Okay, I’m going to train.”

“Please do, but don’t overdo it,” Myalo said.

Dolla left the room.

“Phew.” Now that she was alone, Myalo sat on the bed and sighed.

Fortunately, Dolla was more rational than she’d expected. Kicking him in rage must’ve had an effect on him. It turned out that anger was effective at times.

“Yuri... Where are you right now?” she quietly asked, her face buried in the pillow.

She felt weary and wished someone would comfort her. Without Yuri, it was like the sturdy tree that she could always shelter beneath was gone, leaving her exposed to the ice-cold rain. They’d spent so much time together since first meeting that she’d forgotten how much she relied on him. He made her forget it was raining at all.

Everything’s fine. I just know he’ll come back like nothing happened.

Myalo tried to convince herself, but it felt like she was wearing down her spirit in the process.

If he dies, I don't know how I'll live by myself. Maybe I'm much weaker than I thought.



Afterword

We've finally made it to the fourth volume. This is Fudeorca.

I claimed this would be a chronicle of war, and now it has finally started. I owe gratitude to you dear readers for waiting for it so patiently.

War is a fairly complicated thing.

Sun Tzu once explained, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

That quote sums up everything in a nutshell, but it's difficult to do because war is complicated.

It's easy to make an analysis like, "The enemy's tanks are old-fashioned, so even if they outnumber our state-of-the-art tanks five-to-one, we still won't lose." However, it's much more difficult to make policies based on an analysis like, "The population's identity differs from ours in this sort of way, so doing this sort of thing will lower the possibility of a conflict between us." And it's incredibly difficult for any nation's army to compile such analyses into a written manual for avoiding conflict with that population, command all officers to read and understand it, and then to make them put it into practice.

And though you might win consistently during months of simulations, the lack of proper infrastructure on the ground may prevent an army from advancing freely. Likewise, installing a puppet government might sound good in theory, but if the people who make it up are all corrupt, then the locals will soon come to hate them and side with the opposing army. There's also the possibility that fatal problems that no one had anticipated may arise. So the "you need not fear the result of a hundred battles" idea doesn't hold true.

But even without considering complex factors, something like the death of a king of a friendly neighboring country could result in a new leader who hates your nation and declares war on you—then you'd be fighting on two fronts. It's hard to anticipate something like that before getting into a battle. The opposite

actually happened during Frederick the Great's Seven Years' War—the hostile empress of Russia suddenly died, and her successor admired Frederick so much that he immediately made peace and handed Frederick victory.

I've gotten onto the topic of Prussia. A little after Frederick the Great's time, there was a military leader known as Otto von Bismarck. He unified Germany and turned Prussia into the German Empire. In the process of unifying Germany, he thought, "we need to fight with France." Essentially, he thought a war with France—a country with which they shared much history—would help the citizens of German nations solidify their identity, thus unifying them.

He had other reasons besides that, but he did indeed initiate a war with France. He published a statement—known as the Ems Dispatch—to the world, which recounted what he'd been told in a dispatch from the king, but with the details altered to make it sound like a French diplomat had been incredibly rude to the king and offended him. Bismarck's altered version of events was still factually correct, but certain aspects were exaggerated and made it seem as though France already considered war inevitable. Chief of the General Staff, Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke, and General of the Infantry, Albrecht von Roon—both of whom were army officers—were in attendance when the alteration was made. In the end, France fell for Bismarck's cunning ploy by declaring war. They were defeated, just as Bismarck had predicted. Everything went according to Bismarck's plan, and a unified German Empire was established.

When the Franco-Prussian War ended this way, it became one of the very few that went according to plan from start to finish. It was a war carried not by emotions, such as anger, but purely by political motivations. Unlike the spectacular wars waged by Napoleon and Hannibal Barca, this one seemed well thought out, where political and military genius had gone hand in hand. You might say it was close to Sun Tzu's ideal of winning first and then going to war.

But rather than talking so much about this topic, I should return my focus to this series. (I've got a lot of afterword pages, so I thought I might as well fill them.)

Although this work takes place in Scandinavia, the world is a little different from the real world.

Somewhere—I think it was in volume two—it was said that the world’s axial tilt was about nineteen degrees. The world where we all live has an axial tilt of about twenty-three degrees. The modified tilt makes the seasons change more gradually, and since the base of the Baltic Sea is also wider in the story’s world, the climate is quite different.

As for why I decided to change these details, I thought that if I made it exactly the same as Scandinavia, then people who are actually familiar with the climate of that region might notice that the details in the story are a little off.

The temperature and humidity don’t matter so much; the biggest problem would be the midnight sun and polar nights. In reality, the northern latitudes of Scandinavia have the midnight sun where the sun never sets during the summer, and conversely, polar nights that make it dark all day during the winter. (The threshold is at the 66.3 degrees northern latitude, so perfect midnight sun and polar nights don’t occur in the Stockholm region, but it comes close to experiencing those phenomena.)

The readers of this work are mostly Japanese, of course, so settings where this phenomena occur are probably unfamiliar, which could make it difficult to get immersed in a world where it’s constantly daytime or nighttime. That’s why I changed the world this way. It’s also helpful for me because it’s more familiar for me too.

To give a little more detail, the change in axial tilt was caused by the impact of a large meteor in the past. The islands and peninsula region around Denmark are absent in this work because they were hit by a large fragment of the meteor that broke off as it fell.

Now I’m completely out of things to write, so I’ll continue with the story that I always write here. This will be the conclusion.

To recap, a man living in his car had stopped my father while he was out running, so my father had run over to his workplace, fetched a newspaper with job listings in it, and handed it to the man.

“Then he was really grateful,” my father said. “He wanted to thank me somehow, so he rummaged through the jumble of things in the passenger seat

before pulling out a wrapped dessert and handing it to me. But obviously, I felt a little wary.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t really feel like eating it, so I left it there on the table. I hope it didn’t give you a bad stomach.”

That had to be the dessert that I’d eaten the evening before.

My older brother, who was there with us, burst out laughing.

“No, it didn’t,” I said.

“Well, I wouldn’t expect someone to hand over a poisoned dessert in exchange for getting help, so I’m sure it was fine.”

And that’s the end of the story. Sorry it came to such a weak conclusion.



“I’m so happy I can’t
help but, uh...grin.”

MYALO

YURI

I plummeted downward,
on a collision course
with the dragon.





CAROL

“This is so warm. Maybe we should’ve done this from the start.”

Bonus Short Stories

Sham Reviews a Manuscript

“So...I have to read another one?”

“Yes. Read it and tell me your thoughts.”

Sham was in her dorm room. Standing before her was a famous author of culture books, Pina Colata.

Pina had come to Sham’s room wearing pajamas and handed her a bundle of bound paper. It was a neatly written copy of her original story.

There was nothing unusual about this scenario—it was common for girls in their pajamas to visit each others’ rooms at night. Sometimes they’d even sleep there, but everyone had to be back in their own room before the wake-up bell rang the next morning. It was the height of disgrace to be seen wandering the corridors after the bell, when everyone else was walking around in uniform. They’d face a stern warning if they got caught. If someone *did* end up oversleeping, the only way out of the situation was to put on a uniform belonging to the owner of the room, then return to their own room and change again.

Sham had never done any of this because she barely had any friends.

“Why does it have to be me? I’m not interested in this stuff...”

Although Yuri made money out of these books, he hated them. If he were to learn that Sham was reading them, he’d probably faint.

“I tend to get carried away, so a little scathing criticism is just what I need to keep me in check. Everyone else praises me, but that’s bad for my writing.”

“Ugh...”

“Don’t you want the reward?”

“Well...”

Pina had offered a list of questions she'd predicted to appear on the intermediate Ancient Shanish exam. It was certainly an appealing proposal—her predictions often turned out to be correct.

"All right. I'll do it."

"Great."

"Can I read it after?" Lilly called from the desk at the back of the room in her usual relaxed tone.

Lilly perused the books once in a while. Though she wasn't exactly a bookworm, she did enjoy reading. She wasn't just trying to read it before everyone else; she probably just wanted to go over Pina's manuscript to have something to talk to her younger roommate about.

"Yes, of course," Pina said. "I don't mind."

"All right. I'll borrow it later."



"Uh..." As usual, Sham didn't get it. A lot of it was just confusing to her.

"What did you think?" Pina asked.

"Well, let's start with this part." Sham returned to an earlier page and pointed to the section that bothered her. "'Cut the crap, you're mine forever. You're not going anywhere...' But he's the one cheating... Well, I'm pretty sure 'cheating' is the right word. Don't you think his tone's a little arrogant for someone unfaithful?"

The line was spoken by Yuri to Myalo, but he was actually two-timing her with Dolla. The whole thing was ridiculous.

"A lot of girls find it exciting when someone's arrogant and unreasonable."

"I've said this before, but isn't this volume's story similar to the last one?"

"Yes..." Pina replied after a pause. Her expression made it obvious how much Sham's remark had bothered her.

"I'm no expert, but do girls really get excited over seeing the exact same thing happen all over again except with different characters? I guess people like

familiar ideas.”

“Yes... That’s exactly how it is.”

“What about you, Sham?” Lilly interjected. “What kind of plot would *you* like?”

“Lilly,” Pina said, “I just came here for critique, not for—”

“No, it’s fine,” Sham interrupted. “Let me think.” Sham felt awkward if all she did was critique someone else’s ideas. It felt wrong not to give some alternative suggestions. “If people get excited over these unusual relationships between people of the same sex, then how about a similar story with Carol and Myalo?”

“Huh?” Pina was stunned. She reacted like she’d been struck by lightning.

“That’d be something we’d never seen before, right?”

“But...I can’t write about royalty. Oh, but if they’re both girls...” Pina receded into her own world for a while and mumbled to herself for a while. Finally, she exclaimed, “Sorry! I’m going now. Thank you.”

With that, Pina abruptly left the room, leaving behind everything except the clothes she was wearing.

Dolla’s Training

That day, Dolla was out behind the dojo practicing with his spear.

After training inside the dojo was over and the students had finished cleaning up, Dolla had decided he’d keep going alone because he hadn’t had enough. He’d do so outside, though—he didn’t want to get the dojo dirty again after they’d just cleaned up all the fallen sweat. If his own sweat covered the floor, he’d have to wipe it up himself afterward.

He held an ugly-looking spear made from iron and hardwood that required effort just to lift. His swing was so slow that a bird could’ve perched on it. As he continued his sluggish movement, his bones creaked and his muscles grew hot and screamed at him. This was a test of the smallest movements of his muscles. Unlike hacking at a tree, quiet motions like these were ideal for training alone without bothering anyone.

Thirty minutes passed while he was still slowly swinging his abnormally heavy spear. When his arms were finally about to give out, Dolla put his spear on the ground.

“Haaah... Haaah...” He breathed deeply as sweat dripped from his body, which had already been damp with perspiration to start with.

Now that his muscles had been set free, a satisfying sense of fatigue filled him.

The exposed skin of his face and arms was covered in sweat. Since his saturated top felt uncomfortable to wear, he removed it and wrung it out, though not with enough force to damage the fabric. Then he used it to wipe his face and arms.

As he was recovering in the slight breeze, a Cultural Academy student who'd been watching from a grove of trees came running toward him.

“Ah, um...!”

“What is it?”

“Please read this!”

She held out a letter in a parchment envelope with “To Dolla” written on it. Apparently, this one wasn't for Yuri.

“Sorry, but it's no use giving me a love letter. I decided I'm not replying to them. I'm no good at writing.”

Dolla had received countless letters like this one, but for some reason, they never mentioned wanting to date him. Many of them said little more than “I like you,” “I love you,” or “I'm in love with you.” They were written as though the sender merely wished to express their feelings and didn't need a response. Some of them also said things that made him a little uncomfortable, like, “I'm always watching you from afar.”

“Th-That's quite all right... I'd be happy just to know that you've read it, so please... Oh, but, if you don't want to, then please just throw it away...”

The girl was red-faced and looking at her feet. She seemed incapable of looking him in the eye. The experience was clearly embarrassing for her.

Dolla got that way himself sometimes, so he didn't judge her for it. He didn't want to show her any kindness in case it gave her the wrong idea, but he didn't want to ignore her feelings completely. "No, I'll read it. Thanks."

"No, thank *you*! Thank you so much. You've made me happy." The girl's face suddenly lit up, and she lifted her head for a moment, but then her gaze to the ground once again.

Her actions seemed exaggerated. As Dolla tried to understand why, he looked down at himself, then realized the explanation was obvious—he was naked from the waist up.

"Oh, sorry." Dolla hurriedly began putting his clothes back on.

"No, um..."

"What?"

"Um, this too...! I'd like to give it to you! Please use it!"

The girl held out a thick towel. It was fairly long and narrow, and it was the ideal size for wiping away sweat. It didn't have a feminine design either, so he'd feel perfectly comfortable using it.

"Oh, thanks. Can I use it now?"

"Yes! Please do."

After waiting for her permission, he wiped his face and arms, followed by his chest and abdomen, which had all since begun dripping again. The towel did a better job of clearing away the sweat than his wrung-out clothing had.

After he'd finished cleaning his body, he looked at the girl and saw that she was staring at him in a sort of daze.

"Thank you! Goodbye!" she exclaimed.

Myalo Grabs a Bite to Eat

Myalo was walking around the city, having just finished shopping. She had Sibiak's layout memorized; her mind held everything, from the positions of the guard posts to the territories of each witch family.

That's a new store over there.

It looked like a good bakery. It had sweet buns that looked like they'd have a long shelf life.

"I'll have one of those please."

"Here you go. Thank you."

Myalo handed over some money, and the storekeeper wrapped up a glistening brown bun before handing it over.

She started to eat it while she walked. She wouldn't have dreamed of such a thing in the past, but now it felt natural.

This tastes great. I just hope they can keep the store going.

The area she'd just visited wasn't ideal for opening a new store. It was right on the boundary between two greedy witch families' territories. Whenever a store was established there, there'd be a fight between them over who got to extort the owner for protection money. If things went well, the store owner would be protected by the first witch that approached, who would then prevent others from harassing the store. If, however, a lingering dispute saw the store paying both witch families, then its future would be bleak. The business would be impeded in every way. It would be a victim of various types of criminal behavior, and the demands for protection money from both families would increase.

Naturally, this pattern almost always resulted in the shop closing down soon after it opened because it couldn't do business.

Hmm... Myalo thought about it as she ate, causing the taste to turn bittersweet. When she was finished, the bun left behind an aftertaste of fragrant butter.

It was easy for someone like Myalo to foresee such problems. If the store owner had been a friend who'd come to her for advice, her instant response would've been to give up on that spot. But she didn't want to spend her days offering advice to businesses in the region—she accepted that these matters were out of her hands.

She continued to walk until the Ho family residence came into view.

The presence of a chieftain family household like this one didn't sit well with witches.

Needless to say, the Ho family didn't have to pay them protection money, and the trouble such families caused went beyond what the capital's unwritten rules were designed to handle.

For example, although the Ho family wouldn't generally police the witches' behavior, they'd quickly put a stop to it if someone was being abducted or a shop was being robbed right outside their residence. That could result in a witch's henchman being killed, and the witch would be left with no recourse. Things could easily get complicated.

In practice, it meant that the premises outside of a chieftain family's front gate weren't under the witches' control. Chieftain families generally owned those properties and lent them out to merchants in the area.

The building across from this Sibiak residence was currently occupied by Ho Company, and a company store was located beside that. The store was bustling at that very moment as it sold imported goods. It was full of people. Although the same goods could often be found at other stores for a lower price, many preferred to shop here to make sure they got the genuine article. A bottle of wine bought here wouldn't turn out to be some other drink mixed with colorant and put into an old bottle. The store didn't chase off window shoppers, so many were just there to see the curious artifacts on offer. Encouraging people to take a look and stoking their curiosity was part of the store's purpose. Even if the customers were to buy their goods from other cheaper stores later, the profits would still make their way back to Ho Company.

"Myalo?" a familiar voice called out.

"Oh, Yuri."

"What are you doing here?"

"I ran out of ink, so I came to buy some." Myalo had a cheap bottle of ink in the shopping bag she was carrying.

"Ah. You've got breadcrumbs around your mouth."

“What?” Myalo quickly put her hand to her mouth and plucked off a large piece of bread. “Sorry.”

“Were you headed back to the dorm? You should join me for lunch first. I was just thinking I’d be lonely eating by myself.” Yuri was considerate enough to word his invitation so that it was easy to accept. It was unlikely that he’d ever been planning to eat out by himself.

“Yes, I’d be happy to join you.”

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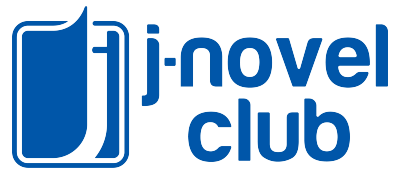
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The Conqueror from a Dying Kingdom: Volume 4

by Fudeorca

Translated by Shaun Cook Edited by Maral RahmanPour

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